(the first time) he kissed a boy

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Relationship:	Hasegawa Langa/Kyan Reki
Additional Tags:	Practice Kissing, Mutual Pining, oh boy a lot of pining, Fluff, Light Angst, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Gay Panic, Insecure Kyan Reki, Coming Out, Fake/Pretend Relationship, this is just gratuitous kissing and langa being a disaster gay, Panic Attacks, Bullying, Hurt/Comfort, i lied lol apparently it's sad at some parts too, also reki's dad is kinda shitty, it's in the past but please be aware anyway!, Slow Burn, i guess ahaha oops, Angst with a Happy Ending
Language:	English
Collections:	warm me up like soup, Gr8 sk8 books, Slow Burners, be crime do gay - the greatest collection of gay fanfic to ever exist., to be read sk8 the infinity fics, call 911 for I have died at the sheer perfection that are these fics, FFs that deserve multiple reads, my all time favorites!, Fics_I_dream_about_every_night, sk∞, late night bittersweet reads, Ur mom <3, best of da best ;), comfort reads, renga fics for the soul, Sk8TheInfinity_Fanfictions, Sk8TheInfinity, fics i think about all the time, Hurt/comfort fics for the soul, International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, i'm in love with these fics, renga yuh, langa/reki fics that have more plot than sk8 the infinity, Leymonaide fic recs, Best of Renga & Sk8, best fics i have ever ever read, The Holy Scriptures, RANDOM_FANDOM, fics i cant stop thinking about, sk8, Literally art works, Ajs rereads, Aj's good vibes, My Absolute Favorites, favs <3, My feel-something-Favorites, all time favorite, my comfort reads💗, Ruth's assortment of treasures ✨, Ruth's SK8 recs 🛹♾️, scors favorite fics of all time, fics that altered my brain chemistry, AHHH MY BOY REKI, Others I've read and liked, Sk8 :), everything poetic, library of love ☆, :)Absolute Best, Im obsessed with these, old favorites
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by buzzcut__season

Summary

Reki is insecure about his lack of kissing experience. Langa just wants to help him feel like he's good enough, even if teaching Reki to kiss means breaking his own heart.

(yet another practice kissing au)

Notes

hey babes I watched all of sk8 in one sitting this week and i'm here to offer the fandom a practice kissing fic! :)

edit: if you would like, please see the
completed Spanish translation
!!! thank you so much for all the love <3

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I feel like I should teach you something, too,” Langa explained.

Reki frowned, his hair ruffling in the wind. As usual, he had wolfed down his lunch in five seconds flat and was now sitting with his legs crossed, bouncing his knee every few minutes and feeding Langa bites of his bento. “What do you mean?”

“Because you taught me how to skate,” Langa said. “I should teach you something, too.” The problem was coming up with something he could do that Reki couldn’t. Langa glanced at him. Reki was impressive in so many ways; he was strong and fast and he could mend a skateboard without a owners’ manual and he could cook ten-minute rice in five minutes, and his smile could always make Langa’s heart feel a little lighter, no matter how sad and tired he felt, and okay, okay.

Langa shook himself a little, to clear his head. He needed to stop thinking about those things all the time. It was becoming a problem.

“Well,” said Reki, pursing his mouth, and Langa glanced at him and then quickly looked away so he wouldn’t hyperfixate on Reki’s mouth. He was always doing that, lately, especially in class, and then he couldn’t focus on anything else. Then Reki brightened. “I know! You can teach me to speak Canadian!”

Langa snorted before he could stop himself, covering his mouth. Reki frowned at him.

“What?”

“Canadian isn’t a language,” Langa choked out, and Reki sat back, still frowning.

“What do you mean? Do you guys just mime everything to each other over there?” His headband was slipping over his face, hair adorably messy, and Langa could barely hold himself back from reaching forward and fixing it. He couldn’t do that; he had made a rule for himself, no touching Reki more than necessary, in case Reki started thinking Langa was weird and stopped hanging out with him.

Before Langa could try to explain how English worked, Reki waved his hand.

“Ah, it’s just as well,” he said. “I’m no good at learning languages anyway. Let me think.” He stretched his hands in the air, toward the fence behind them, tangling his fingers in the wires and looking toward the sky. Langa allowed himself to look at Reki, just for a minute—well, he promised himself it would only be a minute. Lately even looking at Reki made his cheeks feel warm and his chest feel strangled. It was just that Reki was so expressive, he was always making faces, and seeing his eyebrows furrow or his tongue poke into his cheek did funny things with Langa’s stomach.

The staring was getting out of hand. So Langa hastily made himself look away again, scolding himself.

“I know!” said Reki again, dropping his hands and turning to Langa with an excited grin. “You can teach me how to be good with girls!”

Something cold sank to the bottom of Langa’s stomach. *Oh.*

He swallowed. Then he swallowed again, because suddenly his throat felt very dry, the strangled feeling creeping up his chest. He hadn’t known...well, he guessed he should have known, shouldn’t he? Of course Reki liked girls. Of course he did. Reki was grinning, practically vibrating, and of course he would be the type to fix up a fancy sports car just to take pretty girls driving, of course he would be the type to dance with pretty girls in nightclubs, of course he would be the type to declare undying love for a pretty girl on the day he met her.

Langa should just feel grateful that Reki hadn’t met that pretty girl yet.

He shouldn't feel like a part of himself was dying inside.

Langa swallowed a third time. "Oh," he said, eloquently. "I mean, I'm not very...I don't know much about...I mean, you know I've never had a girlfriend before, don't you?"

Reki stared at him, amazed. "Really?" he said, putting his feet on the skateboard in front of them, moving it back and forth. Langa swallowed again, trying not to look at Reki's bare lower legs. The hair there was thick and it looked soft and Langa knew how strong Reki was and he forced himself to swallow *again.* The staring again. He had no right to stare.

"I—of course." Langa felt all tongue-tied. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair for Reki to sit so close, so warm and solid and look so *good* and then get so excited when asking Langa about girls. It wasn't fair, but Langa shouldn't like him anyway, he shouldn't feel this way, so he took a deep breath and tried to explain, "I'm sort of— I'm kind of—you know, awkward." His cheeks itched.

Reki shook his head. "Ah, don't say that! You're super smooth. The girls in our class are always looking at you."

"No," Langa tried to say, but Reki talked over him, the way he did sometimes when his mouth moved faster than his brain and he forgot to pay attention to people around him.

"You totally are, dude. You're super cool and you smell good, like a clothes store, and you make the uniform look better than anybody else. See, you're cool! Except when you're wiping out in the skate park, but there are no girls around then to see you, just me."

"Just you," Langa echoed distantly.

"Yeah, dude," said Reki. He patted Langa's arm, and his hand was so warm that Langa sagged, a little, against the fence. When Reki was done with his patting, he left his hand there, soft and solid, creasing the sleeve of Langa's uniform. Langa looked at his lap so he wouldn't stare at Reki's hand. He liked the way that Reki's knuckles were knobbly and red and the way he had a Pokemon band-aid wrapped around his thumb because it was all he'd had at home when Langa accidentally rolled his wheel over Reki's fingers. It was such a nice

hand, and Langa felt like crying all over again. He wanted to hold Reki's hand. He wanted to feel that warm weight against his palm, but he couldn't, and he needed to get a handle on himself before he had a breakdown right here on the school roof, over something silly.

"What do you want me to do?" he managed. If Reki wanted Langa to find him a girlfriend—well. Langa wanted to say he wouldn't do it, but he would. He owed Reki, after all, but it wasn't just that, it was also, just, god, he wanted Reki to be happy. If having a girlfriend would make Reki's smiles bigger and his laughter louder, then how could Langa deny the world something so wonderful?

"Lemme think—lemme think," Reki said, leaning against the fence, letting his hand slide idly down Langa's arm, and Langa's body burned with every inch. "Well, have you ever been on a date?"

Langa hesitated. "Once, I...I think?"

"Okay," said Reki. "Did you kiss her?"

Langa flushed. There had been no *her,* but his tongue was still tied up, and he wasn't sure how to explain something like that to Reki. Not because Reki would have a problem with it, of course not, he would probably sit up and wave his hands around erratically and apologize profusely for assuming. Reki would make a big deal out of it. But maybe he would take his hand off Langa's arm, and Langa ached when he thought about Reki taking those touches away. They touched so often, so casually. Langa would cradle those touches against his chest until he died.

"Sort of," he admitted, and Reki bounced his feet on the skateboard.

"So you know how to kiss!" He looked at Langa with a big grin on his face, his pretty eyes all squinted up at the corners, smile lines deep like crow's feet, and Langa's stomach went cold and bottomless with the realization of what he was about to say, just as Reki said, "That's something you can teach me!"

“How—” Langa sputtered, his mind fragmenting into images of Reki’s mouth, his hair, his hands (his hands on Langa’s face) and god, no, he couldn’t think about kissing Reki, if he thought about that his whole body was going to break out in a cold sweat and then he would have to go to class all sweaty with his mind full of *kissing Reki,*

but before he could figure out how to emphatically refuse, the warning bell rang, and Reki scrambled to his feet, tilting back and forth on the skateboard. “I owe you one, Langa!” he said. “Well, I guess you owe me first, right?”

His grin was so bright, the sun behind his hair lighting up his face and Langa’s mind fragmented further, hopelessly, into a million pieces of *Reki Reki Reki.* Oh no, he thought desperately, oh no.

It was impossible to pay attention in class. Of course Langa sat right next to Reki, which was normally not a problem, no, they were *friends,* they were just friends and Langa could handle a little thing like sitting next to Reki and watching him make faces at the board. Except Reki kept doing the thing where he poked his tongue into his cheek, to concentrate, and Langa’s brain got derailed thinking about Reki’s tongue, god, Reki’s tongue touching his own, and no, that should be gross. It should definitely be gross. Why was he sweating?

“Oi,” Reki whispered across the aisle. “Langa. You’re breathing funny, you good?”

His tongue was pressed to the top of his teeth when Langa glanced at him, and Langa felt his breath stick traitorously in his throat, and he coughed in his arm. And then he choked for real, and he couldn’t stop coughing, and Reki bounced up out of seat to pat him on the back.

“Please sit down, Reki,” said their teacher from the board, sounding weary.

“Sorry, sir!”

Langa rubbed his mouth, still hunched over his desk, feeling the warm weight of Reki's hand on his back. God. Jesus. Fuck. He was in trouble.

"You wanna come over before S?" asked Reki, balanced on his board outside the school gates, as Langa tied his sneakers. He dropped his laces clumsily, on purpose, just to buy himself time, because he was sure the blush was rising in his face.

All he could see were Reki's feet, his constantly shifting feet, moving around the board, tilting it one way and another. Reki was always in motion. It was one of the reasons Langa couldn't stop *staring* at him all the time.

"Um...to study?" Langa fumbled with the words. They rarely studied together, they both had miserable grades and Reki always wanted to ditch the books to run outside and skate, and Langa could never deny him anything, god, he was really helpless, wasn't he? But when he thought about what *else* they might do at Reki's house...well, his chest was already getting tight and strangled again and he didn't need to start coughing his lungs up again.

"Oh," said Reki. He cleared his throat. "Well, no. I was thinking...we could, you know, do what we were talking about at lunch."

Langa dropped his laces again, staring down into the dirt. God, how could Reki just *say* things like that? It was like he had no brain-to-mouth filter, and Langa swallowed hard, trying not to think of all the things Reki might say if they actually ended up kissing. *That feels good,* he would say, shifting in Langa's lap, tugging absentmindedly on the ends of his hair, *I think we should do it some more. You wanna do more, Langa?*

Langa stood up abruptly. His chest was a tight, hot ball against his ribcage, and he said, "Sure."

Reki chattered for most of the ride home, coasting along next to Langa. He could talk on and on if Langa let him, and Langa usually did, because he didn't mind listening, in fact he usually liked it. Reki knew so much, mostly about skating but also about the places they

passed, small things like dented cafe chairs and bus stop graffiti, and Langa never minded the ways he interrupted his own stories when he spotted something new.

Today, though, he couldn't focus. Would Reki really want them to kiss each other? Or would he make Langa practice on one of his pillows? And, god, Reki's pillows always smelled like him and Langa was going to lose his mind.

Before he could catch himself, his board ran off the curb and he stumbled, toppling off backward as the board went flying out from under his feet.

Reki screeched to a stop. "Hey!" he said. "Don't die on me." He jumped off his own board and grabbed Langa's before it rolled down into the street below. Langa straightened up, rubbing at his elbows sheepishly, but Reki just grinned at him. "Did you get a boo-boo? Need me to kiss it better?"

Langa's face was burning. "No."

"Aw, I'm just kidding. You're the kissing expert here, not me."

"Stop," said Langa, because his tongue was all tied up and he was pretty sure he was going to die, and Reki laughed and punched his shoulder good-naturedly, like a bro, because they were just bros, and he said,

"We're almost home anyway. Here. Carry this. I don't want you going flying into the street again."

Langa made a face at him, but he tucked his board under his arm, and he waited until Reki's back was turned to flip him off, hands still shaking.

Reki kicked the bedroom door closed behind them, and then cursed to himself when it bounced back open, and Langa flopped onto his back on Reki's bed, staring up at the ceiling.

He listened to Reki moving around the room, throwing their backpacks onto his desk chair, opening the window to the warm summer air, so Langa could hear the sounds from the street outside, bicycle bells jingling and mothers calling to their children. Through Reki's walls he could also hear his sisters playing, one of them knocking repeatedly against the wall to Reki's bedroom, and Langa let his eyes sink closed. Reki's house was always loud, but that was okay. Langa kind of liked the distraction.

"Hey, so," said Reki, and the mattress dipped when he sat down next to Langa, his body warm where his thigh fit against Langa's side. He'd always been so comfortable touching Langa, cuddling up against him when they watched skating videos, and he had even once laid in Langa's lap. That memory was one of Langa's most precious memories, and he often lay awake in bed, daydreaming about that afternoon. For a wonderful hour and a half, Langa had been allowed to run his hands through Reki's soft hair while Reki talked about Shadow and his girlfriend-not-girlfriend. Langa would give almost anymore for another chance to play with Reki's hair like that.

The mattress shifted again, and Langa opened his eyes and squinted up at Reki's, whose hair was a messy halo of red around his face. In the sunlight from the window, his cheeks were pink and the smile lines around his mouth were dimpled and golden, and suddenly, achingly, Langa wanted to kiss him more than anything.

"You really want to practice," Langa said, sort of a question, sort of not, trying to keep his voice low so no one would hear, watching Reki's face as he scrunched his nose up. God. He was adorable. Langa could just...with his hands cupping Reki's warm sunburnt face...his fingers slipping into the soft cloud of his hair…

"Yeah," said Reki, but his voice wavered just a little, and he sat back slightly, out of Langa's direct line of sight. "I mean, not if you're uncomfortable, dude. I didn't think about that. Are you uncomfortable? I should've asked that to begin with, I didn't think, huh, I really should've…"

"I'm not uncomfortable," said Langa, and the words died in Reki's throat, and he bobbed his head instead, a single nod. Langa swallowed as he pulled himself up into a sitting position,

across from Reki, their knees knocking against each other, the sun lighting up the fair hair on Reki's calves. Langa swallowed again.

"You sure, dude?" Reki asked.

"I'm sure," said Langa. And how could he say no when Reki was giving him a chance to touch him? He had wanted to kiss Reki since the first day he managed an ollie and Reki had leapt to his feet, his enthusiasm bubbling over, his palm warm and rough with callouses when he slapped it against Langa's. He had stood so close that day, his face creased up in the biggest smile, and Langa had smiled back, thinking, *he's so nice,* and then, *he looks so pretty,* and then, *I'd like to kiss that smile,* and then, *oh no, oh no, oh no.*

Oh no indeed.

"Okay," said Reki, fiddling with his sleeves, tugging them down and then up and then making a face. "Can I take off my sweatshirt? Sorry. It's just. I'm just."

"It's okay," said Langa, and Reki wrestled with his bulky sweatshirt, and Langa tried to breathe, averting his eyes when Reki dragged the sweatshirt off and his t-shirt rode up over his stomach. He knew that sometimes things like that bothered Reki. They'd be cuddling and Reki would suddenly bounce up and switch positions and explain that his brain felt funny.

But the stalling didn't last long, and then Reki was settling in front of him again, closer than before. "Okay," Reki said again. "So, um. How does this work? What should I...what should I do?"

Langa took another breath. He tried to think, but his brain felt all clogged up with the way Reki's hair fell messily over his face, mussed from taking off his hoodie. "Um," Langa said. "Well, I guess, if you were with a girl you probably wouldn't kiss until after you went on a first date? So, uh, pretend we were just on a date, I guess."

Reki nodded slowly, glancing up toward the ceiling, then toward the window, thinking. "Okay," he said. "I'd take you to the skate park. And we'd practice for a while, and then get ramen."

Langa felt warm all over, even when a breeze blew through the open window, ruffling Reki's wild hair. "Not me," he made himself say. "That's not what I...just pretend I'm a girl, alright?"

Reki glanced back at him, and for a moment his eyebrows furrowed, and he looked like he was going to ask a question, but then the lines in his face smoothed away. "Okay," he agreed. "You're pretty, you know, Langa? I think that's why all the girls like you so much."

The heat in Langa's face rose, and for a moment he couldn't work any words around his tongue. God. His cheeks were burning. The way Reki said his name—the way he called Langa *pretty,* so casually, so honestly. How could he just *say* things like that casually? Langa had spent one too many nights mourning Reki's own prettiness with his pillow clutched to his chest, and here was Reki casually complimenting him, as if Langa being pretty were simply a fact, an easy truth.

"You're breathing funny again," Reki observed, reaching forward and tucking some of Langa's hair behind his ear, and the band-aid around his thumb brushed against Langa's cheek and Langa swallowed through the lump in his throat.

"Sorry," he said, and Reki laughed a little, settling his hands back into his lap, and Langa's hair fell back into his face again.

"Don't be sorry," said Reki. "I'm the idiot with no experience. Well, that's why I'm learning! So, okay, tell me what to do."

He sat there, hands in his lap, waiting eagerly for Langa's instruction, completely oblivious to the way Langa's throat went dry before he could swallow again. Jesus. Reki had no idea what he sounded like. Langa could tell him to do anything, except of course he *wouldn't,* he wouldn't, Reki was his friend and Langa was going to be a good friend and he was not going to take advantage of Reki's innocence by asking him to lay down and let Langa run through his fingers through his hair, over and over and over until he finally satisfied the deep ache in his chest.

No. Langa swallowed. "Okay, um. I guess you should. You should ask first."

“If I can kiss you?”

“Her,” Langa corrected, his throat dry again. “If you can kiss her.”

Reki nodded slowly, watching Langa’s face, and Langa saw the way Reki’s eyes dropped to his mouth, and a shiver ran through Langa’s body, so he had to clench his hands in his lap. Reki’s voice was soft when he asked, “Can I kiss you, Langa?”

Langa shivered again, because Reki had said his name a hundred times but never like *that,* and he nodded, because he wasn’t sure he had any words for the way Reki’s eyelids went heavy-lidded in front of him.

Reki leaned forward, and Langa remembered to lift his hand and put it against Reki’s jaw, and god, the weight of Reki’s face settling into his palm—he was so warm. Reki paused and opened his eyes again and glanced down at his own hands. Then Reki put his palm against Langa’s face, too, fumbling a bit with the grip, the band-aid tickling the place where Langa’s jaw met his neck. Reki could probably feel the way Langa swallowed once, twice, three times,

and then Reki leaned in again and Langa’s brain shut down.

He vaguely registered the hesitant brush of skin against skin, the three seconds when Reki lingered against him before pulling back, flustered. “Did I do something wrong?” he was asking, before Langa could open his mouth. “You didn’t move.”

Langa blinked, trying to focus on Reki’s face, his mind still lagging on the feeling of his lips. “You didn’t do anything wrong,” Langa said slowly, watching the way Reki’s eyebrows creased together, his mouth pulling to one side like he was self-conscious, and Langa’s stomach sank as he suddenly understood.

Reki had asked to practice because he didn’t think he was good enough.

Langa squeezed his eyes shut so he didn't have to see that look on Reki's face. Of course Reki probably compared himself to Langa, who got love confessions in his locker every other week, he probably stared at himself in the mirror and wondered if he was doing something wrong. Langa never wanted Reki to feel that way. He wanted Reki to know how wonderful Langa thought he was, but Reki didn't care about that, he only wanted Langa to help him practice, so he could go on to be wonderful to other people.

"Do it again," Langa whispered, a bit hoarse. "It was—it was good."

Reki made an aborted noise in the back of his throat, and Langa wished his stomach wouldn't clench at every sound Reki made, and then Reki put his hands carefully on Langa's face and leaned in again.

This time the kiss was softer, still hesitant, the lightest touch as if Reki was afraid of putting too much pressure on Langa's mouth. Langa could feel the tickle of his exhale, and something hot itched in his palms, until he placed them, warm, on Reki's shoulders. Their knees fumbled against each other as Langa moved closer, Reki's head tilting, and then their mouths slotted together and Langa's throat closed up .

He could feel Reki's rapid heartbeat through the skin near his neck, and after only ten quick beats Reki pulled back barely an inch to gasp a breath. "Sorry," he mumbled, leaning in again, their mouths bumping, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, allowing Reki to fumble with the new kiss while his own stomach clenched and unclenched and clenched in time to Reki's pulse.

It felt good. It felt so good that Langa wanted to die, because what if Reki pulled away again and rubbed the kiss off his mouth with his sleeve and said that was enough? Langa held tightly to his shoulders, tilting his head against to deepen the kiss because he might not have another chance.

This time when Reki pulled away, Langa had to pause to catch his breath, too, and shame began to crawl up the neck of his neck like a flush. God. He had gone too far, hadn't he? He had wanted too much. Maybe he had made Reki uncomfortable, except, please, please, he just wanted to kiss him again, *please.*

Langa squinted his eyes half-open, to gauge Reki's reaction. If he looked uncomfortable, Langa was going to grab his things and make a hasty escape. But Reki just looked flushed and unsure, touching his lips with his fingers and then quickly shoving his hand in his lap when he saw Langa looking.

"Was it—" Reki's voice broke off and he cleared his throat before trying again. "Was it alright?"

"It was good," said Langa, and then he flushed, because he sounded too genuine, he sounded too much like he wanted Reki to push him over onto the bed and lie on top of him and kiss him in the dying light until they could taste nothing but each other. "I mean—uh. I think you're okay. I'm not a kissing expert or anything, but it was—it was enjoyable. I mean. Um."

Reki still looked unsure, scratching one wrist, looking out the window and then down at the bed and then back up at Langa. "Is that—" He hesitated. "Is that all there is? I felt like—" He frowned, his mouth working over the words. "I felt like I could be doing more."

He sounded determined, a bit worried. Langa's stomach ached again. He thought about what it would be like to smooth his hands over the creases in Reki's face, over his wild hair, and whisper that Reki was doing enough—that he *was* enough. He thought about how Reki would smile against his hand and surge forward to kiss Langa again, more enthusiastic this time, sending them toppling backward, Langa gripping the back of his t-shirt, the both of them laughing against each other's mouths because Langa would want him no matter what.

"Well, um." Langa cleared his throat. His first kiss had been very brief, and it had ended badly, very badly, but Langa quickly put that memory aside. This moment was about Reki. "It depends, um, on what you want, and um, what the girl wants, I guess. You can do whatever you like, I don't really…"

"What do *you* like?" Reki interrupted, and Langa swallowed, his throat dry.

"What do you mean?"

“Is there something you like when you’re kissing somebody?”

“I told you,” said Langa, his voice weak, “I’m not some kind of expert, I don’t have—I don’t have very much experience.”

He could tell from the way Reki raised his eyebrows that he didn’t believe that, but Reki still said, “Okay,” and then, scratching his wrist again, “maybe we could try again? And whatever you do, I’ll try to copy it.”

He brightened up again, like he thought this was a good idea, grinning a bit, and Langa’s stomach twisted, because this was beginning to feel like the way Reki had tried more and more dangerous tricks on his skateboard to try to copy the things Langa did without thinking. But he nodded anyway. There was no way Reki could hurt himself by kissing, at least not with Langa. Langa would make sure he was okay.

“Okay,” Langa said, “but it’s probably going to be bad, just a fair warning.”

Reki scoffed, still smiling, and Langa’s stomach eased a bit, at that smile. “Aw, it won’t be bad,” he said. “C’mere.” And he tucked his hand over Langa’s shoulder, the same way he did when they were hanging out together at lunch, and it was the most natural motion he had made since they started this whole mess, and Langa’s heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces Reki pulled him in to kiss him again.

Because *this*— the way Reki’s mouth found his own more easily than before, the way he breathed in just before pressing close—this must be how Reki would kiss him if he was doing it just because he *wanted* to.

Langa swallowed back the lump in his throat as he cupped Reki’s face again, and this time Reki was the one to shift closer, and even that tiny bit of confidence made Langa’s whole body feel weak, his arms sagging as Reki held onto his elbows. Reki’s mouth was warm; the way his thumbs rubbed up and down Langa’s arms was warm, and Langa began to lose himself in the feeling of Reki kissing him, eyes closed and mind swimming, until a breeze blew through his hair and Langa remembered he was supposed to be trying something new.

He pulled away, just barely, and Reki made a soft noise, chasing his mouth, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut again, his palms hot as their mouths pressed together again. God. Reki was so *eager.* Langa was going to die, he was going to die, and before he could overthink it, he touched the tip of his tongue to Reki's bottom lip.

Reki's whole body paused. Langa hesitated—he had never done this before, he had only watched videos—but when he slid his tongue over the seam of Reki's mouth, it felt so good, it felt so good that Langa didn't want to stop, he wanted to come apart in Reki's arms, Reki's hands gripping him so tightly, and then Reki made another soft noise, and Langa's chest melted.

Reki's head tilted, his lips parting slightly when Langa ran his tongue over his bottom lip again, and Reki made a sort of rasping sound and then the tip of his tongue touched Langa's and Langa's brain short-circuited, *so good so good* it felt *so good* , and Reki did it again, and his tongue was hot and Langa was hot, his whole body alight, burning up, and he could hear himself panting into Reki's mouth.

"You good, dude?" Reki whispered, against his lips, rubbing his thumbs over Langa's arms harder, soothing, almost a massage, and Langa wanted to cry, he wanted to grab the back of Reki's head and kiss him again and again and again. This had been a mistake. How was he ever going to look at Reki's mouth again without feeling the touch of his tongue, the burning in his chest? Reki handled him so gently. It made Langa want to collapse.

"Yeah," Langa whispered back, shaky, and Reki sat up, so Langa couldn't feel the warmth of his breath anymore, and it took him a moment to collect himself, to swallow down all the words he wanted to say: *don't go, kiss me again, I never want to stop.*

"We did good," Reki said, as if he was reassuring Langa, and Langa swallowed and nodded even though he didn't know what the hell he was doing, kissing his best friend until his mind went fuzzy, and Reki grinned, and Langa remembered, *oh, that's why.*

"It was—" Langa tried to find a word that wouldn't give up the way his heart throbbed at the light shining off Reki's eyes. "You're right," he said, instead. "Do you feel, um. Like you learned something?"

Reki nodded, but then he bit the inside of his cheek and glanced at the window, where the leaves from his tree were waving into the bedroom. “Well,” he said. “Well, maybe we could do it again tomorrow? I feel like I have a lot more to learn, you know, like how to use tongue, and what to do with my hands, and how to use teeth—wait, are you ever supposed to use teeth? Like I know you’re not *supposed* to, but what if you do, and it feels kinda good, then is it okay?”

Langa took a deep, careful breath, trying to stop the flush rising to his face. Reki looked at him with the ghost of a grin still hovering around his mouth, waiting for Langa to answer, and Langa’s voice was only a little strangled when he said, “We can, um, we can try, I guess.”

“You sure?”

Langa nodded, and Reki paused, so Langa said aloud, “Yes, I’m sure,” and the grin settled back onto Reki’s face, warm and sure and happy, and Langa’s whole body ached. He wanted Reki to look that way always—confident. Maybe Langa could make him feel like that, if only for a little while.

Chapter End Notes

edited 5/29/21: hello hello! thank you so much for checking out tfthkab. this fic obviously reached a lot more people than i ever expected, and while it is far from perfect, it holds a special place in my heart. please remember to read the tags and keep an eye on the trigger warnings at the beginnings of the chapters!

finally, please see the lovely cover art by discountscoobyart on tumblr!! i have been very blessed over the course of this fic, and i hope you enjoy reading it half as much as i enjoyed writing it <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

throughout this fic, I will use the opening notes to provide general content/trigger warnings in case you would like to skip over certain topics. If you don't care about the warnings, please feel free to scroll past the opening notes, as they may sometimes contain spoilers.

cw for this chapter: Reki thinks Langa is watching an inappropriate video in front of him. i have been told it is very embarrassing. to skip, please pause at "What are you watching?" asked Reki, and ctrl+f to "“So it’s fine,” Reki said, reassuring." thank you for reading, and please stay safe!

Langa fell asleep that night replaying the kiss in his mind, and he woke up the next morning replaying the kiss in his mind, brushing his teeth and thinking of how soft Reki’s mouth had been, the warm, clumsy way his lips moved, his face so close that Langa could see every faded scar from his skateboarding falls. He couldn’t think of anything else besides how much he wanted the kissing to happen again.

Maybe he could steal Reki away from class somehow, taking Reki’s broad, callused hand and pretending he needed to use the bathroom. As Langa packed his lunch in the kitchen, he lost himself in a daydream where he was fumbling to get a stall door locked, he and Reki crowded into the tiny space together, Reki bracing his arms against the walls and laughing nervously. *“Won’t we get caught?”* Reki would ask as Langa turned around, and Langa would whisper back, *“No,”* because in the daydream Langa had all the confidence in the world and in his daydream Reki swallowed and let his eyes drift to Langa’s mouth, and in the daydream a blush began to rise on Reki’s face, *adorable,* and in the daydream…

“Langa,” said his mother, and Langa cried, “Ah!” and nearly dropped his lunchbox.

Shamefaced, he straightened up and turned around. His mother tilted her head, holding her cardigan around her pajamas.

“You’re going to be late for school,” she chided, but then she opened her arms and waved him in for a hug, and even though Langa always felt embarrassed hugging his mother, he had

to admit that she gave good hugs. Today he closed his eyes when she patted his back.

"Have a good day," he said, awkwardly, when she let him go.

"You too," she said, smoothing his hair away from his face, and when Langa stepped outside to climb onto his moped, he felt a little bit better than he had last night, when he had gone to sleep aching to kiss Reki again. He and Reki were still friends, he reassured himself. That was enough. It was enough. It was *enough.*

It wasn't enough.

Reki had his feet up on the edge of Langa's seat, legs balanced across the aisle, and he was talking enthusiastically about his drawings, showing them to Langa one by one, and each time he said, "Oh oh oh!" Langa's heart melted a little more. Jesus. His heart never beat this quickly unless he was racing down a hill at 25 mph, and today he was just sitting at his desk, watching Reki's bandaged fingers point out smudged pencil drawings, and his heart beat so fast against his chest that it hurt.

He wanted to ask to see the drawings up close. He wanted to trace the lines Reki had made with his finger, as if somehow he could puzzle out Reki's heart that way, too.

But too soon their teacher called the class to attention, and Reki gave Langa a grin, poking his tongue out a little, and even though Langa *knew* Reki was just trying to make a funny face, his heart did a painful squeeze as they all faced the front. This wasn't enough. He loved Reki as a friend, he wanted to be his friend forever, but now he was thinking about his mouth again, and about getting to lie in his bed in his arms, listening to Reki talk endlessly about every drawing he had ever done.

"Let's go to the skate park," said Reki the next day. "I wanna take some videos of you."

So Langa followed him to the skate park, where they hung out until the sunset, and then they walked to the convenience store for slushies. They sat on the curb while they drank the slushies, and Reki pressed his arm against Langa's for a blessed half an hour, and Langa thought about kissing him. Reki had said they could practice again, but Langa couldn't stop wondering, desperately, *when.*

But then the sky got dark and they said goodnight, and Langa lay awake again, far too late, thinking about him.

Maybe if he kissed better, he thought, then Reki would want to kiss more often. Maybe he would start thinking of Langa as a real expert. Maybe he would begin to have feelings for...no. No, Langa couldn't start thinking like that, but he still wanted to improve. He made a resolution to himself the next day during class. He had been clumsy last time, he hadn't known what to do with his tongue, but next time he would be more prepared.

"You wanna come over before S tonight?" asked Reki after school, flipping his board over with his foot. The answer was yes, like it always was, because Langa would follow him anywhere, but he knew Reki liked to ask anyway. Something about hearing the verbal confirmation.

"Okay," said Langa. His heart started to flutter in his throat again, thinking about kissing practice. Would Reki sit him down in his bed again and put his palms against Langa's face? Maybe he would let Langa sit in his lap. Langa swallowed. No. That was too much. The thought of himself perched on Reki's strong thighs, Reki's hands on his jeans, tugging him closer, Reki lifting his chin to grin up at Langa, his hair falling away from his forehead—

"I wanna work on your board," Reki was saying, and Langa stumbled a bit, pushing away from the curb with his sneaker. "I was looking up some things I could change last night, and then I stayed up way too late watching videos about it. But it's okay. Because I was thinking that for the back wheels…"

Langa listened to Reki chatter, but as they rode through the trees, his chest felt heavier, somehow. Last night he had been lying awake wondering when Reki would want to kiss him again, and that had been the furthest thing from Reki's mind. Maybe Reki had forgotten about the practicing already. Langa's chest throbbed a single, painful time against his ribs. He

thought he might break apart if he had to keep waiting, wondering when he could kiss Reki, only to slowly lose hope that it would ever happen again.

When they got to Reki's garage, Reki kicked their backpacks into a corner and grabbed Langa's board, turning it upside-down on the table. Langa sat across from him, watching him unscrew the back wheels as he babbled about who was going to be at S that night.

"I think my mom heard me sneaking out the other night," Reki said, his tongue poking out in concentration as he wrestled with the board. "Because this morning she asked if I ever went out at night to meet girls. I told her no. It's the truth! There are no girls around who are interested in me."

Langa bit the inside of his mouth. It tasted like metal. "If you want..." he said. "I mean, if she catches you sneaking out, you can just say you were with me. I think my mom would cover for us."

Reki glanced up. "Really?" When he pushed his hair out of his face, his thumb left a long mark of dirt, and Langa's hands itched to rub it away.

"Yeah," he said. "I think...well, she'd definitely be disappointed in me if she found out I was sneaking out. But I wouldn't get in *trouble.* I think my mom's too afraid to get me in trouble ever since, you know."

Reki went quiet, bobbing his head, his forehead furrowing. Reki never seemed to know how to talk about Langa's father's death. Langa wasn't sure anyone in Reki's life had ever died before, so maybe it wasn't something he could really grasp, and Langa didn't really want to talk about it, anyway, so he said,

"What are you doing? Tell me so I understand," and Reki launched into a description of every book or manual he'd read about this particular type of wheel, all jumbled up so Langa forgot all the titles right away.

He liked listening to Reki talk, and when Reki ran out of words to say they just sat in comfortable silence while Reki worked on the board. Langa's phone buzzed with a text from

his mother. *Thought of you!* she had written, alongside an article titled, "A High Schooler's Guide to Confessions."

Langa winced to himself. He knew she meant well, since he had sort-of-accidentally told her about his crush on Reki, but how could he confess to his straight best friend? He would only make things awkward.

He glanced up at Reki, who was humming to himself, and then thumbed the edge of the phone, thinking. He didn't need advice for confessing, but maybe he could find advice on...other things. Quietly he opened up a new tab and typed, *how to kiss well.* So many search results popped up that at first Langa felt dizzy, scrolling through helplessly, glancing at diagrams too complicated to understand. Then he found the videos. Ah! This would be much easier. No reading involved. Reading usually made Langa's head hurt.

He clicked on the first video, which seemed educational. His volume was turned off, and the video was in English, so Reki would never know. Carefully Langa held the video up to his face, watching the way the people tilted their faces to slot their mouths together. The video had a white background, and it all looked very sanitary, nothing like the warm, dreamy light in Reki's soft bedroom, with the air ruffling through their hair, all the feelings in the world held in Reki's amber eyes, in the curve of his smile. Dissatisfied, Langa clicked the next video, which looked hotter, anyway, that was probably better—

"What are you watching?" asked Reki, his voice closer than Langa expected, and in surprise Langa dropped the phone in his lap.

Reki glanced down. He was standing right in front of Langa, holding the skateboard, and Langa panicked. *Please, God,* he thought, but when he looked down at the video, it was much worse than he had imagined. In a dark bedroom, a woman was climbing onto a man, his hands sliding to her waist, and—

"Okay!" said Reki loudly, spinning around, and Langa fumbled desperately for the phone, but he hit the volume button instead of the power, and no language barrier could mask the sound of moaning that echoed through the garage.

When Langa finally managed to silence the phone, his whole body sweating, hands shaking, Reki had returned to the table, his back still to Langa. "I'm sorry," Langa managed, and his

voice cracked, as if this whole ordeal wasn't humiliating enough already.

Reki waved his hand in the air. "It's cool," he said, but his voice cracked too, and Langa winced. It wasn't cool. This was the complete *opposite* of cool.

"It wasn't what it looked like," he tried, but the sentence trailed off, because how could he explain? *I just wanted to be good for you? I wanted to kiss you so well you'd start to like me back?*

Reki cleared his throat. "Like I said, man," he said. "It's cool." He rubbed his elbow, turning around so Langa could see his face, and he winced again. Reki was red, and this was *not* one of the ways Langa had imagined making him blush. "I didn't, uh." Reki coughed a little, into his fist. "I didn't peg you as the kinda guy to watch that stuff, I guess. Dumb, right? I guess everyone does it."

"No," said Langa, his face burning, "I wasn't...I wouldn't do that in public, I was just…"

"It's okay, man," said Reki. "We all have our needs."

"No, stop," said Langa, "stop, stop, that's not what I—"

But then Reki laughed, an awkward laugh, but still a laugh, and Langa let his excuses break off, his face still burning as he tucked his phone into his pocket. Great. Just peachy. Now Reki imagined him as the kind of guy who tried to get off in public, and if he hadn't thought Langa was a perv after the whole kissing episode, he definitely did now.

"It's fine," said Reki for the millionth time, hopping up to sit on the edge of the table, his feet swinging. "We were bound to have a moment like this eventually, anyway, right? That's what happens between best friends. You end up knowing uncomfortable stuff about each other."

Langa swallowed, hard. "Right."

“So it’s fine,” Reki said, reassuring, leaning back on his wrists. “What’s your type, anyway? You never talk about girls, even though they give you the googly eyes all the time.”

Langa swallowed again. He cast his mind around for some description that wasn’t too close to Reki—he could barely remember the last time he liked someone who wasn’t Reki. “Uh,” he said, and Reki laughed again.

“You have this super blank look in your eyes,” he said, kicking at Langa’s knees. “C’mon, you must think about it sometimes? Or is it all skateboarding in there?” He tapped his temple, teasing, and Langa could feel his flush rising again. “Skateboarding and Reki?”

Jesus Christ. Langa knew his whole face must be red, and Reki started laughing again, kicking at him in a friendly sort of way. He was just teasing, but Langa felt a bit like he was going to have a heart attack if this went on much longer. *Jesus.*

“What’s *your* type?” Langa asked, quickly, when Reki’s snickering died away, and Reki rubbed at his elbow again.

“Uh,” he said, and then laughed. “I guess I haven’t thought about it much either.”

Good, Langa almost said, and then felt the flush of shame on his neck. He had no right to be possessive over Reki. They were just friends, and Reki should be with whoever made him the happiest. “I thought you wanted a girlfriend,” he said.

“Well…” Reki let the word drag on, gazing past Langa and out into the yard. “I don’t know. It’s more about finding someone I really connect with, you know? It doesn’t matter what they look like. I just want someone to hang out with all the time and talk about skateboarding with and, I don’t know, whatever else they’re passionate about. I don’t know. I just want someone who gets me, you know?”

He looked at Langa, grinning, something soft shining in his eyes, and Langa bit his tongue, because that something soft was meant for the girl he was imagining, someone undoubtedly

lovely who would always know the sweetest things to say, someone who would never pant clumsily against his mouth, someone who would never watch *how to kiss good* videos around him and make an idiot out of themselves.

"Yeah," Langa said, his throat dry, "I get you."

And he did, because it was the exact way he felt about Reki, and he wanted to cry, because he could be that person for Reki too, if only Reki would let him, if only Reki wanted him to.

The next day he and Reki were headed up to the roof to eat their lunch together when a girl stopped in front of them, looking up at Langa. "Langa-kun," she said, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

Langa's heart sank. He never knew how to talk to girls, he was horribly awkward, and he hated getting confessions in front of Reki. Already, out of the corner of his eye, he could see Reki's shoulders sag.

"Okay," said Langa, because he didn't know what else to say, and the girl took his arm and pulled him away from Reki, and Langa swallowed back a protest. Her hand on his elbow felt all wrong.

She brought him outside, around a corner near a stairwell, not the spot behind the school where girls usually did confessions. "It's not about me," she explained. "It's about some of my girl friends. They, well, you know. They wanted to invite you to our mixer tomorrow, but none of them were brave enough to do it."

"Oh," said Langa, and his shoulders relaxed a bit, because this wasn't a confession after all, but then he thought about going to a mixer with *several* girls who might want to confess to him, and his shoulders tightened again. "Um, I. That's not really my...my thing."

God, he sounded so lame.

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about,” said the girl, waving her hand. “It’ll be really chill. We’ll meet at the corner after school, alright?”

Langa opened his mouth and then closed it again. Well, now he didn’t know how to refuse. “Um,” he said. “I don’t know.”

“It’ll be okay,” said the girl. “Here. I’ll give you my number.” Before he could move away, she had stolen his cell phone out of his pocket and opened up his contacts, and Langa’s hands fell helplessly to his side. The only person who ever texted him was Reki, and sometimes his mom. He glanced up the stairwell. He wished Reki was here, Reki would know what to say, Reki wouldn’t hesitate to grab the phone back, he was always smacking the back of Langa’s head and telling Langa not to just go along with things, but the problem was that Langa could never find the words to stand up for himself.

And then he was thinking of Reki, and a new thought sunk in:

A mixer; single girls.

The girl handed his phone back. Langa didn’t want to say anything, but he forced himself to. “Would it be alright if I...if I brought my friend? He doesn’t have a girlfriend or anything.”

She frowned, deeply. Langa’s hands fumbled on the phone, trying to shove it back into his pants; for some reason he felt so stiff around her, his tongue all tied up.

“Well,” she said after a lengthy pause. “Is your friend Reki?”

“Yes,” said Langa, finally succeeding in fitting the phone into his pocket. He hoped this was the right answer, but he could see right away that it wasn’t. The girl shook her head, her nose piercing glinting off the sunlight.

“We’ve all known Reki since we were kids,” she said. “He’s, well. I mean, you know how he is. You know what I mean.”

Langa’s hands suddenly felt very sweaty and very hot. “No,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “I don’t know.”

“He’s annoying,” said the girl, very plainly, gazing at him with no emotion behind the words, and Langa bit the inside of his mouth, hard.

He could feel his hands clenching into fists, the sky and the grass blurring around them, her face blank. It wasn’t fair, he thought, it wasn’t true, Reki was wonderful, his enthusiasm was so contagious, Langa was awestruck by him more days than not. Sometimes when Reki was skating Langa just sat on the top of a half-pipe and gazed at him for hours. He wanted to say it wasn’t true, but he had to swallow first, and then the only words that came out were, “I don’t want to come to your mixer.”

He turned around. He didn’t want to look her in the face anymore, this girl who said horrible things about Reki, and his hands were still hot, so he shoved them in his pockets. But the girl caught his elbow again anyway. “Langa-kun,” she said. “Okay. Okay. You can bring him. Maybe one of my friends...maybe. We’ll see, okay?”

Langa didn’t say anything for a moment. He wanted to say no and escape up the stairs to the roof, where he and Reki would be alone, and Reki would fill their time with questions about Langa’s new jump and about Canada. He wanted to keep Reki to himself.

But he made himself clear his throat. “I’ll ask him. If he wants to come, we will.”

She released him. “Okay,” she said, sounding put out, and then Langa did escape, his feet pounding on the metal stairs, and he hoped and hoped and hoped that Reki would say no.

“A mixer?” said Reki, as soon as Langa told him. “Wow, really? Wow.” He moved his board back and forth between his legs. They were hanging out at the skate park after school; Langa hadn’t been able to bring himself to tell Reki about the mixer during lunch, because he still felt hot and angry over that word, *annoying,* and he knew he would end up blurting out the wrong thing.

Even now, it was hard to keep his face blank. “Yeah,” he said. “We can go if you want. Do you want?”

“Man, of course I want!” said Reki, and his grin was so wide that Langa almost caught himself smiling, too, just from the brightness of Reki’s face. “I’ve never been invited to a mixer before. Wow! This is so cool. Damn!”

Langa pressed his hands together between his legs. “Yeah,” he said.

“I can’t believe they wanted *me,* ” said Reki, gazing happily off at the horizon, where the orange sun melted into the clouds, and Langa’s stomach clenched. Then Reki laughed a little, ducking his head, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Well, they probably wanted you, right? And I’m just tagging along.”

“That’s not true,” said Langa, even though it was, and his stomach clenched more tightly. He wanted to tell Reki the truth, but he knew how badly it would hurt his feelings, that horrible word, *annoying.* Reki should be with someone who understood how beautiful his face looked in the setting sun like this, someone who ached every night when it was time to go home because they didn’t want to be separated from him.

“Will you stay over tonight?” Langa asked, even though he knew he shouldn’t. His voice just came out; he couldn’t stop it. “After S?”

“Sure,” said Reki, and when he bumped against Langa’s shoulder, all friendly, Langa’s whole body flushed warm.

Langa turned on the bedside lamp in his dark bedroom as Reki closed the door softly, very softly, so they wouldn't wake up his mother. "We good?" Reki whispered, and Langa nodded, pulling off his shoes.

Reki had dropped his overnight bag off before S (and Langa's mom had been so delighted to see him, she always was, because of the way Reki gave her a big hug the first time they met, something Langa still felt hesitant about doing even though she was his own mother) and he scrambled over Langa's bed to pull out his pajamas. Langa tried to distract himself with his phone, but instead of going into the bathroom to change, Reki began shedding his clothes right there in the bedroom, and even though it was dark, Langa could feel the warm *thump* of Reki's sweatshirt on the bed next to him.

He squeezed his eyes shut. He had seen Reki half-naked before, at the beach, or when he spent the night at Reki's house, but every time it was hard not to look. He just wanted to see Reki's stomach, the dip of his collarbones, the dark blush of his nipples. *God.* Langa squeezed his eyes shut tighter. He wouldn't peek, he told himself. He *wouldn't.*

He held his body very, very still until he could feel the mattress swaying as Reki crawled onto the bed, bumping his shoulder against Langa's. "Hey," he said. "Aren't you going to change?"

Langa opened his eyes. He wanted to lean backwards, against Reki's chest, and he could feel Reki settling into a sitting position, his knees pressed against Langa's back. It would be so easy to lean against him. Langa had wanted to sit in Reki's lap for a long time, he dreamed about it sometimes, he just *knew* it would feel so warm and safe and…

"Langa?" Reki poked him.

"Ah," said Langa, jolting upward, and Reki laughed quietly into the silence. Langa could feel his face burning as he moved toward his dresser, searching for the sweatpants he liked to sleep in, and then he held them for a moment, wavering. He could go change in the bathroom. Reki wouldn't care. But when he glanced over his shoulder, Reki was scrolling through his phone (one of the giant S groupchats he kept trying to add Langa to) so quickly Langa shed his jeans and slipped into the sweatpants.

He changed his t-shirt, too, and when he turned around he caught Reki's eyes on him, and even though Reki glanced away immediately, the flush was already rising up Langa's neck. He cleared his throat, and Reki tossed his phone onto the mattress, holding out his arms.

"C'mere," he said. "Man, you went so fast tonight! I thought you were gonna wipe out in the abandoned factory but you didn't, of course, 'cause you're awesome."

Langa stepped toward the bed hesitantly. He didn't want to mistake what Reki meant with those outstretched arms — he didn't want to hope for too much — but as soon as he was within reach, Reki wrapped his arms around Langa's waist with a contented sigh. He pressed his face against Langa's chest, nuzzling a little, and Langa thought he was going to die with how fast his heart was beating, Reki could probably feel that pulse, god, because his face was *right there,* by Langa's heart.

"S'warm," Reki mumbled, and Langa covered his face with his hands, hoping it would end and hoping it would never, ever, ever end.

But Reki popped up a moment later, taking his arms away, scrambling backward on the bed to make room for Langa, who sat down gingerly. He rubbed his hands on his sweatpants. They had slept in the same bed countless times before, and Reki had never made it weird, but now that they had kissed, Langa was sort of afraid that he'd stay up all night watching Reki's mouth while he breathed.

"Hey," said Reki, tugging the blankets down, and obediently Langa crawled under them, settling against the pillows. Reki was watching him, and Langa examined the edge of the quilt, the flush rising again, because he thought that if he looked at Reki right now he would probably burst into a million tiny flames.

"What?" he asked, when Reki didn't continue.

Reki cleared his throat, shifting on the mattress. "Uh," he said. "I don't know. We don't have to, but, uh, I keep thinking about...you know. Like, if we end up going to the mixer, and I don't know, something happens, and...and I was just thinking maybe we should practice again? Just so I'm—" He coughed. "So we're both prepared."

Langa looked at him. He ached, all over, when he thought about Reki preparing tonight for someone better he might kiss tomorrow, but in the yellow light of his lamp, Reki's face looked soft, relaxed, the smallest wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"Okay," said Langa, quietly, and then he hesitated. "Are you...are you nervous? For the mixer?"

Reki shrugged, rubbing at his elbow, and then gave an awkward laugh. "I don't know," he said. "I guess? Maybe? It's just, I'm worried...I'm worried they won't like me, you know, or they'll think I'm weird."

Langa pressed his hands into the mattress. He thought of the girl's horrible voice, *annoying,* and he wanted to tell Reki they didn't have to go. They could just burrow under these blankets, pull the quilt over their heads and stay there forever, but Reki wouldn't want that, he wanted to find someone else.

It was difficult to swallow. "You're not weird," said Langa softly, and Reki made a face, so he amended, "Well, sometimes, but in a good way. It's…" He fumbled for the word. "It's endearing."

"Aw," said Reki, and in the dim light Langa imagined that he was blushing, even though he knew Reki wouldn't blush over something like that, it was just the truth. "C'mere. Okay. We're going to practice, and we're gonna get better."

He moved closer, so their thighs were brushing, and Langa swallowed again. Something about the way Reki said *c'mere* was so affectionate that Langa just wanted to melt into his side, lay his head on Reki's shoulder. Things felt different when they were side-by-side like this, when they had to turn their faces to look at each other, and it was different at night, in the dark. Langa could see the shadows on Reki's face when he put his hand on Langa's shoulder.

"Do you wanna start?" asked Langa, quiet, and Reki chuckled.

"Does one of us have to start?"

Langa shrugged, a little helplessly, because even though he was supposed to be the one teaching Reki, he had never gotten around to learning anything new. Reki put his hand on Langa's face, cradling his jaw the same way he had done the last time, and he drew Langa in.

This time Langa was expecting the warm brush of Reki's mouth, but it still made a shiver go through his whole body. He felt Reki's lips pull away and then come back, a firmer kiss this time, as if Reki had needed to take a deep breath first. Langa tried to tilt his head, and it sort of worked, because their mouths slid against each other, and Reki made a muffled sound against him.

Langa just focused on Reki's mouth for a while, the way his lips moved, the way Reki breathed through his nose, his face warm and so, so close. Then Reki began to stroke his thumb across the bony curve of Langa's jaw, and Langa gave a breathy whine that he nearly choked on, because god, it felt good, the way Reki held his face so carefully with his rough, callused fingers. Reki breathed a laugh against his mouth, and Langa knew his face was hot, but he didn't want to pull away, so he put his own hand on Reki's upper arm and squeezed.

For the first time he felt the muscle there, the firmness of Reki's bicep, and his head went dizzy for a moment before he squeezed again. God. Jesus. Their mouths fell apart so they could breathe, and Reki rested his forehead against Langa's, his hair tickling Langa's face.

"Is it good?" Reki whispered. "Am I doing okay?"

Langa's stomach twisted. "Yeah," he whispered back. He opened his eyes, just slightly, and he could see Reki gazing at him, something so, so soft in his eyes that made Langa want to cry. Slowly Reki traced his thumb along Langa's jaw again, and Langa knew how much the verbal affirmation meant to him so he choked out, "S'really good. You're gonna be...you're gonna be so good for her."

"For who?"

"For…" Langa didn't know, he didn't want to say. So instead he let his eyes fall shut again and pressed forward, and his mouth bumped against the corner of Reki's lips on accident, but Reki just guided them back together and then they were kissing again.

It felt so nice, all the tiny ways that Reki was touching him, his thigh firm against Langa's, his fingers stroking Langa's jaw, their noses bumping. Langa could just breathe in and there was Reki, his pink, wet mouth moving against Langa's own, and each touch felt so precious that Langa wanted to pause and appreciate every single moment. He kept thinking Reki would pull away and the moments would die, but he stayed close, holding Langa there with him.

When Reki touched his tongue to Langa's mouth, pushing a little against his bottom lip, Langa could feel another hot thrill going down his body. He had almost forgotten that they were meant to be learning how to use tongue; he would have been so content with just mouthing softly against each other forever.

And then Reki's thumb was at his jaw again, trying to coax Langa's mouth open, and the hot thrill went down Langa's body again, because, oh, Reki was impatient. Hastily Langa tilted his head and touched his own tongue to Reki's, lightly, so lightly, and Reki made this quiet sound of approval in his throat that made Langa's toes curl, hot, in his socks.

He slid his hand up Reki's arm, just under the sleeve of his t-shirt, and Reki cupped Langa's face with his other hand, so warm that Langa might melt, and he touched their tongues together again. Langa thought he might die from the touch, even though it was so small, and so brief, but they did it again, and again, and Langa could feel his breathing growing heavier, at the way Reki kept coming back for more, as if he couldn't get enough, as if he *wanted* Langa, as if this felt good for him, too, and god, did it feel good for him too? Did he feel all hot and bothered in his t-shirt, like it was caught too tight around his chest?

God, his mouth was so warm.

Reki tilted Langa's head to one side, and Langa pressed his toes into the mattress, choking back a whine at how *good* it felt to be maneuvered like that, the same way Reki fixed his feet into the right position on a skateboard, and Langa was panting now, except Reki didn't stop the way he had last time. He slipped his tongue further into Langa's mouth, stroking over his bottom lip and then touching the roof of his mouth, careful, like he wanted to see what would happen, and Langa gave a shuddery moan against him.

For a moment Langa couldn't breathe; he didn't dare open his eyes. God. He had made such an embarrassing sound, such a horrible sound, but Reki still didn't pull away. His fingers made soothing circles on Langa's jaw as he kissed him again, chaste and sweet, just their lips against each other again like he knew he had overwhelmed Langa and was trying to say he was sorry.

They kissed again like that for a long time. Slowly the tightness around Langa's chest began to relax, and he leaned further into Reki, because Reki's hands on his face made him feel safe, almost loved. Of course Reki only held him so carefully because he cared about Langa, as a friend, but it was so nice to be cared for, and since Reki was kissing him, Langa let himself forget about anything else.

"You look sleepy," Reki mumbled against him, smoothing a piece of hair off Langa's forehead, and the touch felt so good that Langa hoped he would do it again and again, and for a while Reki did, just smoothing the tightness in Langa's temple. "Do you wanna sleep, dude?" he whispered, pulling away more completely, and Langa whined a little at the loss. "You're falling asleep on me."

Langa hadn't realized how tired he was until he opened his eyes. The shadows on Reki's face were soft from the lamplight, his hair loose, falling over his forehead. "Uh-huh," said Langa, a bit incoherent, and Reki laughed quietly and leaned over him to turn off the light. In this position his chest was nearly pressed against Langa's, so close he could feel the rise and fall of Reki's breathing, and Langa let his eyes drift closed again.

"Thanks for helping me," Reki whispered in the darkness, guiding Langa's head down to the pillows, and Langa mumbled against his hand, which felt good. But then Reki took his hand away, which wasn't good, and Langa whimpered, and Reki chuckled softly and tugged the blankets over them. Then he put his hand on top of Langa's, and the whimper died away. He was warm. Langa was warm, too, because he was with Reki.

"Mm," he mumbled, which he meant to be goodnight, and Reki whispered,

"Goodnight," and then, a moment later, "It was good, right, Langa? I thought it was good. It felt really good," and Langa was too tired to respond, but when he fell asleep all he dreamed about was Reki.

Chapter 3

Langa was dreaming of a warm fire in his home in Canada. The hearth was hot, and he was buried in blankets with Reki, his father's voice rumbling in the background somewhere, and Reki was hugging him tightly to his chest. Everything smelled good, like the summer heat and the garage of DopeSketch, and Reki's arms held him softly, so Langa could feel his breathing. For once Langa was completely safe. No one would ever leave him, he would never be alone, he was with Reki and Reki was his and he was safe.

Langa shifted. The dream began to blur, the colors of the fire falling away, and suddenly behind his closed eyelids Langa could see a pale light. When he shifted again, squinting his eyes open, he could see the morning sun peeking through the windows of his apartment.

And Reki was holding him.

Langa's breath stuck in his throat. He blinked at the curtains, past the crumpled fabric of Reki's hoodie and the mountain of blankets around them, and then glanced up at Reki. Reki's face was half-buried in the pillows, his hair everywhere, his headband caught somewhere in the tangles, and he was clinging tightly to Langa, holding him so that Langa's head was nestled against his shoulder, in the hood of his sweatshirt.

Langa's heart fluttered hard against his ribs, against every corner of his chest, and Reki snuggled into his blankets, his open mouth pressed to the pillows. He could see the way Reki's eyelashes clumped together, sticking to his skin, and the rosy flush of his cheeks, warm in his sleep. In the pale glow of the sunrise, Reki looked soft and angelic, almost ethereal, and Langa gazed up at the tiny wrinkle between Reki's eyebrows.

He wanted to kiss him there.

Langa fisted his hands in the blankets. Reki smelled good, the way he always did, a little bit like S, a little bit like sweat and a little bit like Langa, and he was in Langa's bed, buried under Langa's blankets, his warm hands balled up between Langa's shoulder blades. Langa squeezed his eyes closed and tried to tell himself that it didn't mean anything. Reki was just his friend, he just got cuddly at night, he always got cuddly, it didn't mean anything. But Langa's brain was so tired and it was so hard to convince himself that he and Reki didn't

belong together like this, that Reki wasn't going to kiss his forehead sleepily and murmur good morning and kiss Langa with that sleep-clumsy mouth and…

Reki mumbled something intelligible against the pillows. Langa squinted his eyes open again, trying to shift backward so he could see Reki more clearly, but Reki's arms tightened immediately, pulling him even closer than before.

"Ngh," Reki mumbled, his mouth working against the pillows, his fists clutching at Langa's t-shirt. "Ngh...uh...Langa."

Langa stopped breathing. Reki's voice sounded rough and thick with sleep, the scratchy pitch higher than usual, and his hands scrabbled at Langa's t-shirt again, trying to tug him even closer. Langa could hear his heartbeat fluttering again, except now he was nearly chest-to-chest with Reki, so maybe it was Reki's heartbeat, and oh, God, he was close enough to feel Reki's heartbeat, and Reki had mumbled his name into his pillows, and Langa's toes curled in his socks, because he wanted to bury his face in Reki's chest so badly.

Reki shifted so that his face was against Langa's hair, breathing in, and then he gave a contented sort of sigh, snuggling against Langa, and Langa thought he was going to die, because his chest was squeezing so tightly, into a tiny little ball, and at the same time his pulse was thrumming in the tips of his fingers, as if he was going to combust and explode all at once.

Reki was always clingy in his sleep. He always was. He would cling onto anything. Langa repeated those things to himself, squeezing his eyes shut again. Reki just wanted something to cling to. He just wanted to cuddle. He just wanted to cuddle.

And, god, Langa wanted to cuddle too. He was so afraid of falling asleep next to Reki one night and waking up alone (the way he had fallen asleep in his parents' bed one night and had woken up alone and and and) and it was all he wanted, to cuddle against sleep-heavy Reki and his warm, warm body. Reki felt so safe, so good, and Langa's heart was so weak that after a minute he gave in. Carefully he slid his arms around Reki's body and squeezed him, hanging onto the back of Reki's sweatshirt, holding his breath and bracing for Reki to suddenly awake and pull away with an awkward laugh. But Reki just nuzzled his face into Langa's hair, and Langa held on tightly. His heartbeat was still vibrating at a mile a minute in every one of his limbs, but Reki was still asleep, and Langa closed his eyes again, telling

himself this was okay. They could love each other like this, even if it wasn’t exactly the way Langa wished for.

He imagined that Reki kissed the top of his head in his sleep, but really he knew it was just Reki's mouth working over another incoherent mumble.

They stayed that way for half an hour, and Langa breathed slowly so that their chests would rise and fall together, and he allowed his tense muscles to relax against Reki's warm, warm body. He was like a hot water bottle, Langa thought, drowsy again from the lull of Reki's breathing, the soothing weight of Reki's arm across his body. If they slept this way every night, then Langa would never lie awake in the darkness again, he would sleep so well, like a baby, with Reki holding him and mumbling adorable nonsense into his hair.

But at eight-thirty the alarm on Langa's phone began buzzing, and Reki shifted with a groan, and quickly Langa rolled onto his back to grope at the side table. Reki's arm still rested heavily across Langa's chest, but he didn’t want to shake him off, so he let Reki grumble into the quiet as he lifted the phone to his face and squinted at it.

It took him an embarrassingly long time to realize the phone he was holding wasn't his own. The background glowed with a colorful selfie of him and Reki, squished against each other, a selfie taken before Langa could think to smile, and against the background, reminders began to pop up, one after another after another.

Langa rubbed his eyes, squinting at the screen. It was still hard to read Japanese, but he could make out most of the words, *Remember your bento,* and then, *Text Langa good morning!*

Langa felt his chest flush, warm in his t-shirt, and next to him Reki grumbled into the pillows, trying to tug Langa back with his limp, clumsy arm. Langa knew he shouldn't read Reki's private reminders, but his eyes were already scanning through the rest, catching on his name: *Ask Langa if he slept good last night (he forgets to sleep sometimes)! Remember the code for Langa's locker (6628) in case he forgets again! Hug Langa when you get a chance (he always looks cold)!*

"Ngh-uh," Reki mumbled, lifting his hand to swat at Langa's chest, and Langa jolted, burning hot where Reki's fingers skidding against his t-shirt. "Tu'n off th'alarm."

Hastily Langa rolled over and placed Reki's phone back on the nightstand, grabbing his own and fumbling with the alarm. Then he lay on his side a moment, catching his breath, and Reki sat up, yawning, taking his arm away from Langa's body to stretch. Langa felt hot all over at the thought of all those reminders, things Reki had written down to make sure Langa was taken care of every day.

Jesus. Langa rubbed at his face. Reki deserved better friends, friends who wouldn't snuggle into his warm embrace and pray he wouldn't wake up too soon.

"G'morning," Reki mumbled. Langa sat up, and Reki gave him a sleepy grin as he pushed his hair out of his face, tugging his headband off. Langa had to clear his throat before he could say anything, and even then his voice cracked on,

"Good morning,"

and Reki laughed a little, bumping their shoulders together. Langa was going to overheat, with their legs still tucked under the heavy quilts and their bodies leaning against each other, but he wanted to stay here forever, he never wanted to get up. And then Reki wiggled his toes under the blankets and said, "Big day today!"

At first Langa didn't know what he meant, and his mind went to the reminders, trying to figure out if any of them had been special. But then the realization sank into his stomach like a heavy weight. The mixer. They had to go to the mixer today.

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah.”

Reki beamed at him, his eyes all crinkled up, his hair sticking up at wild angles that only Langa ever got to see, and Langa’s stomach hurt. He could already imagine the kind of girl Reki might find tonight. A pretty girl, shorter than him instead of gangly like Langa, with smooth hands instead of bandaged, awkward hands like Langa’s, a sweet laugh instead of Langa’s deep, strangled one. Langa pushed the blankets off their feet, the weight still heavy in his stomach, and Reki scrambled out of the bed.

Langa stood up more slowly, watching Reki fish through his overnight bag, even though he wanted to stay in bed forever. Maybe soon Reki wouldn't want them to sleep together anymore. He would tell Langa he was sorry, it was just awkward now, with Reki's new girlfriend, and Langa would say it was alright even though something inside him would die, because he would have to go back to sleeping all alone, always alone.

Then Reki paused, glancing up, and Langa waited for him to say something, but he didn't, he just stared at him with a crease forming between his eyebrows.

"What?" Langa said.

Reki jumped a little, rubbing his mouth. "Uh," he said, and then laughed nervously. "I'm sorry for, uh, for being all over you like that. I mean, when we were sleeping. I mean, my kid sisters always do that to me and it's super annoying so I didn't mean to annoy you but I thought I should probably say something so it didn't get awkward and…"

"Reki," Langa said, and Reki broke off, his hands twisting the strings of his hoodie together. "You always do that. It's not a big deal."

"I know!" said Reki. "I know. I know. You're right. Sorry." He grabbed his things out of his overnight bag and scrambled to his feet. Langa didn't understand why he seemed so flustered —he clung onto Langa every time they slept together, nothing had changed. So when Reki squeezed past Langa toward the bathroom, Langa put his hand quickly on Reki's shoulder.

Reki looked at him. Without his headband on his hair was so long, brushing the apples of his cheeks, wispy and soft. Langa swallowed and said, "I don't mind, okay? It's okay."

"Okay," said Reki, watching Langa's face for a moment, like he was making sure Langa meant it, and then he grinned. "After I change do you wanna hit the park? And then we can ride to DopeSketch together?"

"Okay," said Langa, because of course he wanted to spend as much time as possible with Reki, things were never the same when they were apart. But when Reki locked himself into the bathroom, Langa sank back onto the edge of the bed, staring at his feet. He wished that

could be their whole day: skating, work, and then a walk home in the late afternoon, with Reki trying new tricks and falling and scraping up his elbows. They could just spend time together, no one else.

But that wasn't what Reki wanted, so Langa swallowed and then swallowed again and made himself stand up.

"I'm gonna shower," said Reki, when they got back to his house after work, "and then we can go!"

"Okay," said Langa. He wavered in the middle of Reki's room while Reki gathered his towels. Reki's family all shared the same bathroom, which meant Reki's showers usually only lasted five minutes, but today Langa didn't want him to hurry—he was dreading leaving the house. What if the girls at the mixer said something nasty to Reki's face? He checked his phone, but there were no new messages, only the one from earlier giving him the address to the restaurant.

"Be right back," said Reki, clapping a warm hand on Langa's shoulder as he squeezed past him, and Langa gasped out a "yeah" even though the way Reki touched him nearly made him drop his phone.

He sat on the bed to wait, scrolling through his and Reki's messages. Reki sent heart emojis with nearly everything, because he'd once heard Canadians were "super nice" and he wanted Langa to feel "at home." Langa sank backward onto the bed, holding his phone above his face, scrolling until he found his favorite message: *you're my favorite person <3,* Reki had written at 2:33 am two weeks ago, when Langa said he would buy Reki lunch the next day at school. It was a simple message, and even though it was sort of a joke, Langa thought there was a good chance that he really *was* Reki's favorite person, at least right now. They spent so much time together. He let himself read the message over and over, holding the phone close to his eyes, imagining himself being Reki's favorite person forever and ever.

When Reki's door screeched open three minutes later, Langa dropped the phone on his face. He heard Reki laugh as the door closed. "Man, I think you need to get your eyes checked," he

said. “Whenever you read stuff you always have to hold it like one inch away from your face.”

“It’s easier to see if it’s close.”

“That’s what I mean!” said Reki.

Langa picked up the phone and sat up, blinking, and then he blinked some more, heat rising to his face, because Reki was wearing only his jeans with his towel around his neck, his hair dripping down onto his shoulders. His hair was so dark when it got wet, and Langa swallowed, trying not to stare at the birthmark on Reki’s ribcage, the freckles across his upper arms.

“How do you even see when you’re skating?” Reki continued, opening his drawers and searching for a clean shirt. “You’re going to crash into something and wipe out one of these days.”

“I can see big shapes,” said Langa.

“Don’t your eyes hurt?” Reki turned around, his tongue in his cheek, grinning, and Langa swallowed again. He wanted to say that he could see Reki perfectly fine, he could see the dips of Reki’s collarbones collecting water, he could see every twitch of the muscles in Reki’s stomach as he pulled the shirt over his head. Reki laughed at him again, and Langa quickly looked away, trying to pretend like he hadn’t been staring. “You’re such an airhead,” said Reki, and he sounded fond, as if he thought it was cute, and Langa rubbed his hands on his pants even though they weren’t sweaty.

“Are you going to go with wet hair?” he asked, and Reki glanced at the mirror, making a face at himself.

“I thought it would dry on the way over,” he said.

“Okay,” said Langa, but then Reki was looking at him again, one hand going up and hovering around his dripping hair.

“Does it look bad?” he asked, and there was a catch in his voice, something uncertain, and Langa wanted to punch himself for making Reki sound that way. He hadn’t meant it like *that.* Reki always looked good to him, even when they had stayed up way too late at S and Reki was falling asleep on the moped, drooling onto Langa’s shoulder, and okay, maybe Langa wasn’t the most unbiased judge but Reki was *adorable.*

“No,” Langa said, and then hesitated. “I just thought maybe you would get sick going out like that.”

“Ah,” said Reki. He didn’t sound convinced, and he rubbed the towel over his head, still looking in the mirror. Langa hated to think that Reki might look at himself in the mirror and see someone imperfect, someone other than the precious bumbling lovable idiot that Langa saw. Reki always looked good, Langa thought, he always looked warm and sunburnt and happy and he gave the best hugs, and Langa balled up his hands, because he wanted to tell Reki how pretty he looked in the early morning light but he couldn’t figure out how to phrase it without giving himself away.

“Do you, um.” Langa wasn’t sure how to ask. “Do you not like the way you look?”

“Oh,” said Reki. He dropped the towel, pushing his hair out of his face, still gazing at the mirror. “I don’t know? I guess I think I look okay, but no one else ever seems to think so.” He gave a laugh, like it was meant to be a joke, but the laugh sounded off and Langa’s heart sank.

“I—um.” He wanted to say *he* thought so, but instead he made himself say, “I’m sure a lot of people do. You have, um. You have a good smile.”

“Yeah?” Reki turned around, a soft grin on his face, and Langa nodded, because he didn’t trust his voice to explain the way Reki’s dimples looked like the sun coming up, or how cute his one crooked front tooth was, or the way his cheeks rounded out and made Langa smile, too, before he could stop himself. “Okay. You have good eyes. Well, you have a good everything. Man, you’re so handsome I feel like I must be dreaming sometimes, you know?”

Langa choked. “Wh—what?’

“Yeah,” said Reki. “Like, there’s no way anyone’s hair looks like *that* in real life.” He reached forward and lifted a piece of Langa’s hair right off his face, and all Langa could do was blink at him, speechless. He couldn’t breathe, and Reki was so close, and then Reki hummed a little, tucking the hair back, his hand ghosting against the shell of Langa’s ear. Langa shivered, and Reki said, almost to himself. “It’s so freakin’ *soft,* man. How do you get your hair so soft?”

It took Langa a whole minute to realize Reki was talking to him. He blinked, and tried to say, “Um,” but the word stuck in his throat and he had to try again. Reki was still standing so close, so close that Langa could see his eyelashes and his soft smile, and god how could he think when he was trying to process Reki’s perfect eyelashes? “I, uh. I use conditioner. My mom buys it.”

“Really?” Reki let his hand fall, and Langa shivered again, at the loss. “I think my mom has some. Can I put it in now?”

“I think so,” said Langa, and Reki grabbed his arm and tugged him down the hallway into the small bathroom, which was decorated with a leaf-print wallpaper. Reki stood on his tiptoes, peering into the shower, and then emerged with a small, green bottle.

“I always see it in the shower,” Reki explained. “But I never knew what it was for. Show me?” He placed the bottle in Langa’s hands, and Langa’s mouth felt dry, but he nodded.

“Do you want me to—” He gestured vaguely at the mess of Reki’s hair, unsure how to explain, and Reki nodded, turning around so they were both facing the bathroom mirror.

“Please,” he said, and Langa nodded, more to himself than to Reki, as if to say, *okay, I can do this.* Carefully he poured a small handful of the conditioner into his palm, placing the bottle on the counter, and then spread it between his hands, hovering behind Reki.

“It’s okay?”

“It’s okay,” Reki confirmed, meeting his eyes in the mirror and grinning, and Langa’s stomach felt bottomless when he saw that he had grown taller than Reki, only a couple of inches, but for some reason it made his whole body clench and then unclench.

Gingerly he touched Reki’s hair. Reki closed his eyes, and the sight made Langa swallow, but he needed to do this, because he had agreed, so he carefully slid his fingers into Reki’s hair, resting his palms against his scalp. Reki’s hair was damp and rough, thicker than Langa’s and more textured, but Reki rocked a little on the balls of his feet and hummed, and Langa wanted to keep touching him, any way he could. He smoothed the conditioner from root to tip, trying not to miss any pieces of Reki’s wild hair, and when he had finished he let his hands linger, rubbing the conditioner into Reki’s scalp, brushing his hair away from his temples.

“S’nice,” Reki mumbled, and Langa froze.

“What?”

Reki opened his eyes. “Oh,” he said, and then his body sort of tightened, and he laughed awkwardly. “Sorry! I just. It feels nice. When you play with my hair, I mean. It’s not weird. I mean, it’s not weird, right?”

Langa shook his head quickly, because it *did* feel nice, for him too, the texture of Reki’s hair in his hands, the way Reki stood so close that his back nearly touched Langa’s chest. “It’s not weird.”

“Okay,” said Reki, relaxing again. “Should I brush it now?”

“I can do it,” said Langa, surprising himself, but the grin Reki gave him in the mirror made him feel fuzzy. Reki handed him a wooden brush, and carefully Langa ran it through his hair, combing it down over his neck so that the tips dripped onto his shoulders. Even with his hair wet, it still sprang up after Langa brushed it down.

“My mom says my hair is untamable,” Reki explained.

“I like it,” said Langa, because he was so focused now on Reki’s hair that he forgot to filter his words, and Reki gave a muffled, embarrassed sort of laugh.

“Thanks, Langa,” he said, and Langa’s chest pressed against his lungs at the way Reki said his name, quiet and affectionate, and quickly he put the brush down so he could step away and breathe.

“I think it’ll look good,” he said, and Reki nodded, turning around.

“Hey,” he said, and something changed in his voice, and he glanced over Langa’s shoulder at the open door. “D’you wanna...I mean, my sisters are home. Hang on, lemme close this.”

He bumped against Langa’s arm as he reached past him to close the door, and Langa watched him, his throat going dry again. “What?” he asked.

“We still have a little while, right?” Reki said, and Langa nodded, trying to calm his heart, which was beating so fast it was beginning to hurt. “We could, y’know. Just for fun. I mean, to hype ourselves up before...before the big event.”

“Don’t call it that,” said Langa, his voice scratchy from his dry throat, and Reki laughed nervously.

“Sorry,” he said. “I just—I thought, y’know, we could use the adrenaline boost or, I don’t know, do you wanna? We could—”

“I want to,” said Langa, his mouth working faster than his brain, and Reki broke off, their eyes meeting, and after a beat Reki grinned again.

“Okay!” he said. “Cool.” Before Langa could say anything, Reki hopped up onto the counter, spreading his knees, and he held out his hands, beckoning Langa forward. “C’mere,” he said, and Langa’s heart hammered against his ribs as he moved closer, because there was no way he was going to say *no* but oh *god* Reki moved his legs apart so Langa could squeeze in between them, and then Reki’s legs pressed against either side of Langa’s waist, his hands coming up to cup Langa’s face, lifting his chin.

Oh god, Langa thought, almost dizzy with the touch, with the weight of Reki’s legs holding him there. In this position Reki was above him, Langa had to tilt his face up to reach his mouth, and he thought he was going to pass out before they even got to kiss, because Reki’s skin was so warm and flushed from the shower and his grin was so pretty and fuck, fuck.

“Mm,” said Reki, still holding his face, pinching his cheeks a little so Langa wrinkled his nose, heart still pounding. “This is what you would look like to me if I was taller than you, huh? It feels good.”

“Stop,” said Langa, muffled, and Reki laughed, the sound rumbling through his body, and then, *god,* he stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles behind Langa’s back, tugging him impossibly closer, so their chests were practically touching and Reki’s firm legs were caging Langa in and then he kissed him, and Langa couldn’t *breathe.*

Reki’s mouth was wet from the water, and he sort of laughed against Langa’s mouth, and this time Langa could *feel* the sound through their bodies, and god, Reki’s *laugh,* Reki sounded so joyful and good and he was hugging Langa’s body with his legs like he wanted him close—like he couldn’t get enough of him. Langa kissed back, rising up on his tiptoes to press closer, almost feverish with this sudden desperation to be with him, to kiss him, oh god to *kiss* him . Reki leaned back on the counter, still holding onto Langa’s waist and Langa’s jaw and laughing again, pulling back, so Langa had to chase him, making an aborted, frustrated noise.

“You’re so impatient,” Reki teased, holding Langa’s face so he couldn’t get closer, and Langa whined in his throat, and Reki laughed again before ducking down to brush their mouths together. *Yes,* Langa thought, and *oh god,* and he tried to deepen the kiss, his hands on the tops of Reki’s thighs, pressing into the rough denim of his jeans, but Reki kept pulling back before Langa could kiss him good enough and Langa huffed out an annoyed breath.

“Stop,” he tried to stretch up, “teasing me,” and Reki chuckled to himself, smoothing his fingers along Langa’s cheeks, the soft bumps of acne above his jaw.

“But it’s fun,” Reki said, and his voice was doing things to Langa’s stomach, the way he sounded so *pleased* with himself, the edge of laughter creeping in. Reki tightened his legs around Langa’s waist, pressing Langa’s bony hips against the counter, and finally he ducked his head enough that Langa could latch onto his mouth again.

The kiss was clumsy, he could feel Reki’s teeth bumping against his bottom lip, but Reki’s mouth was hot and Langa’s fingers dug into his thighs, holding on tightly. When Reki tilted his head Langa nearly moaned with how perfect it was, the pressure of his mouth, the sweet softness of his lips, the way his fingers massaged at the skin just under Langa’s jaw, where no one ever touched him.

Reki pulled away again, but only slightly, his breathing a bit heavy against Langa’s mouth, and slid one hand to thumb at Langa’s bottom lip. Reki kissed him again, touching his tongue to the seam of Langa’s mouth, and Langa’s stomach clenched, and Reki pulled away enough to whisper, “You like it when I—” and then did the thing with his tongue again, and Langa whimpered before he could stop himself, pressing up into Reki. Reki gave a breathy laugh against his lips, and then he slid his tongue into Langa’s mouth, hot, and Langa whimpered again.

He wanted to kiss back, but all he could feel was the rough pads of Reki’s fingertips, the warmth of his tongue touching Langa’s teeth, his lips, the fumbling of the mouths together. Langa made fists on top of Reki’s legs, the flush on his face so hot Reki must feel it, too, and then Reki pulled back to gasp a breath. And then Langa rose up on his tiptoes again, chasing his lips, and then they both had tongues in each other’s mouths, more panting than kissing, and Langa felt Reki run his tongue along the roof of his mouth, just to feel Langa shudder against him.

This was bad; this was very bad.

It was bad because he could feel the way Reki’s tongue pressed against his bottom lip, the way Reki pulled back to breathe only to kiss him again, and he could feel the back of Reki’s teeth with his tongue as he clumsily tried to replicate the move, and then—and then he slid his tongue along the roof of Reki’s own mouth and Reki moaned against him, he actually

moaned, a low, raspy sort of sound, and Langa could feel his heartbeat behind his eyes, in his fingertips, in his mouth. God. Fuck. He had made Reki feel *good.*

When they pulled apart Langa felt dizzier than ever, as if he would fall over without Reki's strong legs holding him upright, and Reki's face was flushed, his lips swollen. When he licked the corner of his mouth Langa had to lean heavily on his wrists, still propped up on Reki's thighs, because god the kissing had made his mouth look like *that,* all red and bruised and wet and *god.* Langa had made him look like that.

"I feel hype," said Reki, his voice scratchy, his hair a mess. "How about you?"

"Ah," said Langa, incoherent, and Reki laughed in that low, throaty way, swiping his thumb over Langa's bottom lip again.

"I should probably — one more time," Reki said, and he leaned in and kissed Langa flush on the mouth, firm, and then pulled away again, lifting his chin. Langa looked up at him, helpless, his mind completely gone, and Reki said, "Mm. Yeah. One more time."

Langa squeezed his eyes shut as Reki kissed him again, and then a second time, and a third. It felt so good Langa never wanted it to end, he wanted Reki to continue deciding he needed another kiss and another and another until the time for the mixer passed and they could just go bundle up in his room again and watch skating videos until they fell asleep.

But finally Reki pulled away completely, his ankles bouncing against Langa's back, and smoothed Langa's hair out of his face with both hands. "Ah, Langa, you're so pretty," he said, in a sort of wistful voice, and Langa opened his eyes to stare up at him, his whole body full and aching and longing to communicate somehow all the things he didn't have words for, and Reki's kiss-swollen mouth pulled into a smile. He tucked Langa's hair behind his ears and said, "The girls are gonna love you," and all Langa's hopes shattered.

He felt Reki's legs fall away and, probably a minute too late, he remembered to step backward. His mouth was aching with the sweet bruise of Reki's mouth pressing against him, and he almost lifted his fingers to touch, as if the feeling would be tangible somehow, although of course it wouldn't be. Reki hopped down from the counter, his t-shirt tangling around his waist, and Langa looked away while he straightened it out, fluffing his hair with his fingers.

“You good?” Reki asked, and Langa could hear that nervous edge creeping into his voice again, like maybe Reki thought Langa was being weird because he didn’t like the kissing, and not because Langa was desperately, pathetically in love with him. Langa cleared his throat.

“Yeah,” he said. “That was good, um…” He searched for the word Reki had used. “Adrenaline.”

“Hell yeah,” said Reki, punching his chest lightly, his fist lingering there until Langa swallowed again. “You think you’re going to meet someone you like? Probably everyone there will wanna be with you.”

Everyone but you, thought Langa, even though that was pathetically sad, and he twisted his hands in the hem of his button-down. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not really looking for...for anyone.”

“Right,” said Reki, a sort of resigned note in his voice, but he still patted Langa’s shoulder affectionately, like he knew Langa would probably be single until the day he died, in spite of all Reki’s best wingman efforts. Langa tried not to look at him, because Reki looked so good in his rumbled t-shirt with his lips all bruised up, with those hands that had held Langa’s face while Reki laughed against his mouth. How could Reki go to this mixer and meet someone new looking like *that* —like he had just finished messing up Langa’s entire brain in his bathroom?

“We should go,” Langa said, even though he wanted nothing less, and Reki bobbed his head and opened the door.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> tw for panic attacks: Langa feels a lot of anxiety over being left alone, and it manifests in some dissociation from his surroundings. If you would like to skip over this part of the chapter, please pause reading at "What if Reki started dating her?" and ctrl+f to "Bro, watch yourself." stay safe lovelies!!

The sidewalk outside the restaurant was buzzing with people when Langa parked his moped on the side of the road, pausing to glance up at the evening sky. Behind him, Reki took off his helmet, shaking out his hair, and Langa squeezed the handlebars, because Reki's body was so warm when they sat together on the moped like this. Reki always hugged him around the waist to keep his balance, and Langa wasn't ready for that part of the night to end.

"Ready?" asked Reki, when Langa glanced over his shoulder, Reki was grinning so wide his cheeks were round. Langa squeezed the handlebars more tightly. It was such a lively night, couples and families walking by and laughing, and maybe if things were different, Langa and Reki could hold hands as they walked into the restaurant, cramming into a booth so small their knees would press together. Langa had always wanted to know what it would be like to go on a date with Reki. He knew he would probably be too awe-struck to say much, he would just sit there and stare, and maybe Reki would be nervous, too, maybe he'd fumble with his water and laugh too much and get all sweaty.

Langa shook himself, trying to get rid of the fantasy, and Reki leaned forward and unclipped Langa's helmet.

"Don't zone out on me already, man," he said, affectionately, ruffling Langa's hair with his warm, warm hand. "The night is young."

Langa swallowed and nodded. Reki paused, looking at him, still smiling, but then the smile faded a bit and he raised his eyebrows.

“You good?” Reki asked, and Langa wanted to lie, but when he cleared his throat the only thing he could manage was,

“Um, it’s kinda…”

“Are you nervous?”

Langa nodded, relieved. Reki scrunched up his face, sympathetic, and then he tucked Langa’s hair behind his ear. Around them the night was alive with sounds, car doors slamming, but when Reki touched his ear the only thing Langa could focus on were his eyes: big and brown and caring.

“You don’t have to be nervous,” said Reki, but Langa knew that he understood, and it made his heart squeeze. Even when Reki let his hand fall, their legs were still pressed together on the moped, and Reki hadn’t moved to climb off. “Are you worried about the language thing?”

Langa hesitated. “Sort of,” he said, even though it wasn’t the only thing he was worried about. “Sometimes if a lot of people are talking and...and I don’t know how to ask them to repeat themselves, I just go along with whatever they say.”

“You shouldn’t just *go along* with it,” said Reki, and Langa didn’t know how to answer that. They had only come to the mixer because he had gone along with that girl’s horrible invitation, but he didn’t wanna tell Reki that, and after a pause Reki clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. Even through the fabric Langa could feel the bony bump of the finger Reki had broken twice in the same place. “Do you want me to order for you?” Reki asked. “Will that help?”

Langa fiddled with the handlebars. “Yes, please,” he said, even though he knew how to order his own food. It was just nice, that Reki would think to do something like that for him, and he wanted to sit at the table with Reki’s arm over his shoulders, while Reki chatted with the waiter before ordering for both of them. Sometimes he felt like he belonged to Reki, somehow. “Thanks.”

“No problem, dude,” said Reki. He scrambled off the moped, leaving Langa’s back cold, and Langa stuffed the key in his pocket as he stood up slowly, trying to stall. A couple of guys walked past the storefronts holding hands, heads bent together in laughter, and for a moment Langa’s stomach clenched, afraid that Reki would notice and say something.

But Reki just grabbed his arm and tugged him toward the entrance, hopping over the curb. “Man, I’m nervous too!” he said, even though he didn’t sound nervous to Langa. “But also excited. Hey, is there anyone in particular you wanna sit next to?”

“You,” said Langa, his mouth working before his brain could catch up, and then he stopped walking, mortified, but Reki just laughed and pulled him along.

“Okay, man,” he said. “I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry.”

Langa let his hair fall in front of his face so hopefully Reki wouldn’t see him flush.

The restaurant was bright and crowded inside. Reki squeezed Langa’s arm before releasing him, and Langa swallowed back a protest, because all of a sudden he really wanted to hold Reki’s hand. He glanced over Reki’s shoulder around the restaurant. He had no idea where they were supposed to go, and then he realized that he couldn’t remember any of the girls’ faces, and he grabbed Reki’s arm in a panic.

“I forget everybody’s names,” he whispered.

“It’s okay,” said Reki. “We’ll introduce ourselves! I see them over there.” He waved to someone Langa couldn’t find in the crowd, and Langa followed him through the tables and the waitresses, his heart beating sickly in his throat. Sometimes he just got so nervous around big crowds of people like this, and his whole body shut down and his brain wouldn’t work. When they reached the table of their classmates, all their faces began to blur together, indistinguishable, and Langa could barely hear Reki saying hi to everyone. He could never remember faces very well, sometimes he even forgot his father’s face and he had to go find the old photo albums and stare at his father’s features until they were branded into his memory again, but it never lasted, and for a moment Langa’s stomach seized, panicked.

But then Reki was tugging him through the seats to a couple of chairs near the end of the table, and then Langa was sitting down, with Reki's arm pressed comfortably to his side, and when he blinked, things began to focus again. Well, mostly. Maybe Langa really did need to get his eyes checked.

"And this is Langa!" Reki was saying brightly, and Langa blinked again. The girl across from them smiled.

"I know," she said, shyly.

"Oh," said Reki. "I just thought because you're in class B—well, it's okay! Of course you know Langa. He's super popular, but he never believes me when I try to tell him."

"I'm not popular," said Langa. "You're my only friend."

He didn't mean it as a joke, but the girl across from him laughed, looking shyly at them. "I'm Yua," she said. "Langa-kun, I saw you playing soccer last week during class. I was cheering for you."

She was very pretty, and she pronounced his name carefully, as if she had practiced to get it just right, and when she smiled, her eyes looked soft at the corners. Langa's stomach gave an unpleasant squirm. He didn't want her to look at him like that, and somehow he had forgotten every word he knew in Japanese, so he glanced hastily at Reki.

Reki jumped in quickly. "Isn't he amazing?" he said. "I mean, every time I find out I have to go up against him, it's like, shit. Because right away you know you're gonna lose, right? And you can't even be mad, 'cause he's so awesome to watch, and then it's like, gah. Why are you like this, man?" He elbowed Langa, but the only sound Langa could come up with was,

"Ah, uhhm,"

and Reki snickered, and Yua shifted in her seat, turning to speak to a passing waiter.

“You should talk to her!” Reki whispered, leaning close, and Langa’s brain shut down again, staring at the wild hairs of Reki’s eyebrows, the excited expression on his face. “She likes you.”

“Maybe she likes *you* ,” Langa tried, but Reki shook his head, his hair flopping around, mostly dried by now. Langa realized belatedly that he wanted to touch Reki’s hair, to see if the conditioner had made it softer, but when his hand was halfway in the air he remembered they were in public. He made himself put his hand back in his lap.

“Her heart is always stolen by you,” said Reki, with a wry sort of smile, and he reached over and grabbed Langa’s wrist, squeezing, and Langa’s brain absolutely fuzzed out, because Reki’s hand was in his *lap* and they were in *public* and Reki’s fingers pressed right against his pulse point before letting go.

Luckily he was saved from needing to say anything, because their waiter was beginning to take orders on the other side of the table, and Reki slid the menu between them. Langa couldn’t understand most of the descriptions, so Reki whispered them to him, pointing at the pictures so Langa would know what everything was. Langa listened carefully, nodding along, glad to have something to focus on that wasn’t the girls chattering around the table. Reki’s voice was calming, he thought, and anytime they were in a crowded place and Langa got overwhelmed, Reki always did this. He would throw his arm around Langa’s shoulders at S and say, “Hey, look at Reki 2.0,” and Langa would focus on the board while Reki explained some complicated method he had used to alter the wheels or something.

He would barely be able to function without Reki, Langa thought to himself, a bit dazed, and then Reki sat up straight in the chair and told the waiter, “We’re almost ready!” and nudged Langa. “You know what you want?”

Langa pointed to the picture, and Reki rattled off their order, his hand on the back of Langa’s chair, and somehow he made the waiter, and Langa’s heart sort of glowed, even though he was still looking down at the menu. Reki was so amazing. He could talk to anybody and be totally himself, and he always made people laugh, and Langa felt safe just sitting next to him. Whoever got to have Reki as their boyfriend would be the luckiest person in the world. If Reki was Langa’s boyfriend, Langa would shine with pride every time they went places together, because Reki would make everyone laugh and then hug Langa against his side and everybody would know that even though Reki liked everyone, he liked Langa the best, and…

“Langa-kun?”

It was the girl across from them again. Langa glanced up, and, shit, he had forgotten her name already, and he scrambled for words, but then Reki was saying,

“Yua, what did you order?”

“Oh,” Yua said, and then she began to explain a complicated dish Langa had never heard of, and he could feel Reki getting excited next to him, bouncing his knees under the table so much that they trembled Langa’s chair.

“My mom makes that!” he burst out as soon as Yua finished speaking. “It’s this really old family recipe and every time I eat it I think of her. One time she tried to teach me but I’m super hopeless in the kitchen, so whenever we were making the rice, I forgot about it, and then I practically set the whole stove on fire so I had to run around opening all the windows and looking like an idiot and my mom kicked me out of the house for the rest of the day and said I was never allowed to cook again.”

Yua paused. After a long moment she said, “Oh, really?”

“Yeah,” said Reki, sort of laughing at himself, and then he said, “Oh, and Langa, do you remember that time,” and he launched into another story about the time he’d tried to cook Langa an omelet for breakfast, and even though the story was embarrassing (Langa had fallen asleep at the table and drooled all over the t-shirt Reki lent him), he still caught Langa’s attention easily. Reki’s voice was so animated; it had so many different volumes and pitches, and listening to him sometimes felt like listening to several people having a conversation all at once, but in a good way, and Langa wanted to lean closer to him. He wanted to press against Reki’s side. He wanted to…

The waiter paused over their heads, placing their food in front of them, and when Langa glanced up, he saw Yua saying thank you.

All of a sudden Langa's heart was sinking. Yua was watching Reki now, nodding slightly as she picked up her chopsticks. Of course. Of course. How had Langa been so stupid? Reki wasn't talking so Langa could listen to him—he was talking so Yua could listen, and she *was* listening, giving these polite little *oh* s and *really* s as they started to eat. Reki must like her, Langa thought, and his heart sank further, pressing painfully against his ribcage. The way Yua handled her chopsticks was so delicate, her small hands graceful, and Langa could barely even get his first bite to his mouth without dropping his food. God. Reki was so wonderful, just *vibrating* with passion and eagerness, and of course he would want someone else equally wonderful, not dull, clumsy Langa, who could barely string together two coherent thoughts.

"Yua," said Reki, and the way he said her name made Langa sink down in his seat, his heart even heavier. *Say my name, too,* he thought, and then poked his chopsticks into his rice, because that was stupid, but he couldn't help it. He wanted Reki to turn and smile at him again; he wanted Reki's hands in his lap, warm against Langa's own fingers. Reki and Yua were talking about someone from their middle school now, and the names all blurred together, people and places Langa didn't know.

What if Reki started dating her? Once Langa had the image in his head, he couldn't make it go away, and it filled his whole vision, going dark at the edges. Yua was so pretty and quiet, and her hair fell in these soft curtains around her face, and she would replace Langa so quickly. His heart started thudding against his ribs. Maybe soon a day would come when he would be waiting to walk home with Reki, and Reki would put a hand on his arm, grinning self-consciously, and say, *Hey, I'm going to walk with Yua, okay?*

Langa's throat tightened. It was just his imagination, he tried to tell himself, heart thumping, it wasn't real, it wasn't real—but god what if it was real? Langa would have to walk home all by himself. No one would talk to him, and once he got home, the hours would stretch out before lim, long and lonely, in his empty apartment. He would have to sit quietly by himself for so long, waiting for his mom to come home from work. The thoughts were pressing against his lungs now, cutting off his air, and Langa blinked hastily, once and then again and then again because it *wasn't real* but what if it was and what if Reki left him alone? What if Reki stopped leaning against him and nuzzling his head into Langa's shoulder, who would touch Langa then?

His hands were trembling, and Langa pulled his sleeves over his fingers because his whole body was cold and he didn't know how to make it stop, the cold or the trembling or the desperation.

A girl was trying to talk to him now. She was sitting on his other side, a girl with long curly hair and eyelashes too thick and black to be real. Langa's ears were full of incoherent noise and he nodded along to whatever she was saying, but his mind was fracturing. Reki had found a girl he liked, he thought distantly, it was happening, it was really happening, and maybe today had been the last time Reki would kiss him. Langa hadn't appreciated it enough. He hadn't begged Reki for a couple more minutes, he hadn't said anything at all, he had just stood there dumbly, caged in by Reki's warm legs, and let Reki play with his hair and tease him, pulling away from Langa's mouth.

He didn't know how long he sat there. He didn't know how long he nodded along to the girl's voice, which sounded far away and much too fast, an accent he couldn't understand, but finally in a rush of noise and color a waiter lifted his bowl away, and Reki's hand was on his arm.

Langa struggled to process. Reki's hand was on his arm. It was warm. Langa's body was cold and stiff, as though nobody had touched him for a long time.

"We're going," Reki was saying, and for a moment Langa's heart lifted, hopeful, they were leaving, he and Reki were leaving together, they were going to be alone together again. But then Reki grinned, his eyes crinkling up at the corners, his face happy and alive and eager, and he said, "We're gonna walk down to that ice cream place, remember where we took Miya a couple weeks ago? Apparently it's, like, a super popular date spot."

Langa's heart thudded against his eardrums. He nodded, and Reki pulled him to his feet, and Langa thought distantly that he would be helpless on his own, like a blind person stumbling around, only safe when he was at the top of a mountain, alone, where he couldn't mess anything up.

"Was your food good?" Reki asked, when they were outside again, lanterns hanging from the shop windows, their group bundling together on the sidewalk and heading down toward the square. Langa's stomach growled faintly; the meal hadn't been nearly enough, and Reki laughed a little, elbowing him. "You're super quiet, man. Are you sure you're okay?"

Langa hesitated. Reki was having a good time, his voice deep with satisfaction, and he seemed happy and Langa didn't want to ruin it, but Reki had *asked.* And he was so good at listening, even though he interrupted sometimes, or got distracted, because he always

returned his attention to Langa and he always helped Langa find the right words to explain, and Langa wanted to tell him. He wanted to tell him everything.

But before he could say anything, someone appeared on Reki's other side, and Langa's heart was in his throat again.

"Reki," said Yua, in her soft, pretty voice, and Langa's heart pounded *no, no, no,* "Can I talk to you for a second? I mean, ah. Just us?"

No, no, no, I—

"Sure!" said Reki, and Langa tried to swallow, but he couldn't, and then they all stepped off the curb to cross the street and Langa stumbled. For a moment he was falling and then Reki's hand squeezed his arm, steadying him. Langa tried to catch his breath, but there was no air. Somehow he was upright. Reki was saying something, "Be right back," and Langa opened his mouth like a fish but nothing came out. *No no no,* he thought desperately, as Reki's hand fell away from his arm, moving away through the sea of people, *no no no,* Langa couldn't see him anymore, and his feet stopped moving, right in the middle of the crosswalk. Someone bumped into him from behind, a girl's voice, "Langa-kun,"

no no no

but all Langa could hear was the buzzing of cars and laughter around him. He could feel himself walking again, automatically, surrounded by people he should know but didn't, faces he should recognize but didn't, words he should understand but didn't. Reki was gone. What if Langa had forgotten his face already?

He stumbled going back up the curb. His throat was so tight that his eyes were beginning to burn. Somewhere in this scene of indistinguishable faces, that girl (*what was her name?*) that girl was telling Reki the things Langa had never had a chance to say: "I like you, Reki" (Langa liked him more than anybody, the curve of his smile, the joy of his laughter, the way his voice got deep and affectionate when he said "man," the way he kicked the vending machine in frustration when it ate his money) that girl was saying "I like you, Reki, will you go out with me?" and Reki would smile so big, so happy,

he would be *so happy,*

and Langa choked back a sob because of course he couldn't make Reki happy. He could only kiss him a little for practice, he was an idiot, Reki was probably already bored of him and moving onto the next person and Langa had never had a chance to tell him how much he liked him.

The next street swelled in front of him. A big truck was rumbling through the crosswalk, painted in bright colors and Langa's face rose trying to take all the colors in, eyeballs stinging. He didn't see Reki in the crowd. What if Reki had fallen behind? What if he was in an alleyway right now with that girl and she had her hands on his face, sliding her fingers into his hair (*Langa hadn't gotten to touch his hair to see if the conditioner made it soft*) and what if she was stretching up on her tiptoes *(Langa was too tall he wouldn't stop growing)* and what if she was pressing her soft mouth to Reki's and what if Reki was making that deep humming noise against her and, and, and

"Langa-kun—"

One of the girls was touching him, holding him back. Langa blinked and blinked, trying to focus his blurry eyes, and he saw that he had stepped over the curb, into the street. The girl pulled him up onto the sidewalk again.

"—so dangerous," she was saying, and someone else said,

"He doesn't feel danger, haven't you seen him skate?"

and Langa stood there with his hands hanging limply by his sides and remembered the feeling of snowboarding down a too-steep hill, wondering if he would die and not caring, because his father was dead, and because he couldn't feel his body then, everything was numb, and now again all his limbs were going numb.

"Langa," someone said,

and Langa turned around so quickly he stumbled over the curb again, and with a flash of red in his vision Reki was grabbing his arm, pulling him upright again.

“Bro, watch yourself!” Reki said. His face was flushed, and his hand was tight on Langa’s wrist, warm over his pulse point, and Reki was shaking his head. When Langa had righted himself, he could feel the tremor in Reki’s arm, and he searched Reki’s face, wishing he could puzzle out his expression, but he couldn’t and he felt helpless, pathetic.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You almost got ran over by a car, that’s what hap—”

“No,” said Langa, and he knew he shouldn’t interrupt, but his brain wouldn’t listen, it wouldn’t obey him. “What happened with that—with that girl? Did she confess to you?”

Reki looked at him. Langa suddenly got the feeling that it had been the wrong thing to say, but he couldn’t take it back and Reki looked away, off to the side. “No,” Reki said, and then he gave a horrible sort of laugh, the kind he didn’t really believe in. “She was asking me about you. She wanted to know if we were—if we were dating.”

Langa’s brain short-circuited, and he clutched at Reki’s arm, trying to focus himself again. “Wh-what?”

“I know,” said Reki, even though Langa didn’t know what he meant, and he did the laugh thing again, rubbing his arm. “Apparently I’m too—I touch you too much? I don’t know. I’m sorry, man. I probably ruined your chances with her. I tried to tell her you were straight, and also single, but even then I don’t think she really bought it.”

Langa stared at him. Around them, the people started crossing the street again, and Reki nudged him forward, and this time Langa could feel his feet again, sort of, with Reki holding onto him. “She said that?” he asked, and his voice felt clumsy and far away, but Reki was here now, and the feeling was slowly bleeding back into Langa’s body, even though his throat was still tight.

“Well, she said—she said I kept touching you at dinner and so she thought we were—you know.” Reki gave another laugh, and Langa’s stomach twisted weakly. Reki was uncomfortable. He was uncomfortable that someone had thought he and Langa were together, and it was Langa’s fault, somehow, because of course people could probably see how much he adored Reki. Of course they could. People had always been able to read each other’s emotions in a way Langa couldn’t. “I’m sorry, dude,” Reki was saying again. “Do you want me to stop touching you so much? I should probably stop.”

“No,” said Langa before he could think, because Reki’s grip had loosened on his hand, and if Reki let go, then Langa was going to lose him in the crowd again, Langa was going to lose himself. “No, I—it’s okay.”

“Okay,” said Reki, and he tightened his grip again, guiding Langa around a corner and into the town square. The twist in Langa’s stomach tightened too. Maybe Reki would stop wanting to be his friend now that people thought they were together. Maybe he, too, had noticed the admiration in Langa’s eyes when he watched Reki skate. Maybe he would drift away and find other guys who wouldn’t look at him that way, and Langa would be alone again, just like in Canada, where the same thing had happened, and Langa’s throat swelled up all over again.

Reki was doing this thing with his thumb—sort of smoothing it over Langa’s elbow. Langa tried to focus on that, nothing else, as their classmates clumped up near the ice cream truck. The girls had broken up into groups, and as Reki stroked his arm, calming him down, it dawned on Langa that maybe Reki was upset—maybe he should ask Reki if he was upset.

“Are you,” he stumbled over the words. Nothing would come out right, and in English he said, to himself, “ *Are you okay, do you want to talk to the others?”* He repeated it to himself until he could remember the Japanese words, and he could see Reki watching him, confused, until Langa explained himself.

“Oh,” said Reki. He glanced around. Near them, a group of girls was giggling together, and one of them was the short-haired girl who had invited them to the mixer, and Langa’s stomach twisted. “Sure, we can talk to them. I, uh. I think you probably still have a chance with everybody but Yua, you don’t need to worry.”

Langa didn't know how to respond, because his mind got tangled up trying to decipher Reki's weird tone of voice. Reki had gotten it all wrong, Langa didn't want a chance with any of those girls, he just thought Reki would want to talk to them because that was why they had come, so Reki could find a girlfriend. But he followed Reki over to the circle of girls anyway, his mind foggy.

The giggling died down when they approached, but the girls didn't open up the circle so they could fit inside. They just eyed Reki, eyebrows raising, and one of them said, "Did we invite you, Reki? I can't remember," and someone stifled a snicker.

Reki frowned. "You did," he said.

"Are you sure?" she said. "Because remember that time in middle school when you showed up to my birthday party uninvited," and Langa didn't like the way she laughed after she said it. It wasn't a teasing laugh. It was mean, and Langa's stomach twisted more sharply, like she had put a knife through him.

"That was six years ago," Reki protested.

"Well, *I* still remember it," she said, tossing her hair over her shoulder. One of the other girls turned around.

"Did you say something to make Yua-chan uncomfortable, Reki? She looked super weird after talking to you."

"I didn't," Reki started, but another girl said,

"You talked her ear off at dinner, poor thing. She didn't even get a chance to talk to any of the guys she came to hang out with. You know what the point of a mixer is, don't you? It's so girls can meet all kinds of different guys, not listen to you blather on for five hours."

The knife twisted in Langa's stomach again, a slow heat rising through him, and he registered that his hands were clenched into fists, nails digging painfully into his palms. He opened his mouth to say something, but everything was too loud, and the girls began talking over him, their conversation overlapping, too fast for him to keep up. Reki's hand tightened on Langa's arm, and Langa heard one girl say his own name.

"Let Langa-kun meet people, too," she said, "he's never going to, with you clinging to him all the time."

The conversation spun onward, but Langa's brain couldn't move past those words. Reki looked up at him, and their faces were so close that Langa's brain stuttered, the blur of Reki's red hair overwhelming him. Reki's eyes were hard, determined, something tight around his mouth. "I'm gonna go buy us ice cream," he said, and Langa focused desperately on his voice so he wouldn't miss anything. Reki's words were low and careful. "What d'you want?"

"I, um." Langa couldn't think. His hands had eased out of the fists, but he could still hear the horrible things those girls said replaying in his mind, and he couldn't *think* . "Um, whatever —whatever I got last time we were here."

"Okay," said Reki, squeezing his arm, and then he said, "I'll be right back, okay? You can have a minute to yourself."

And then he was wiggling through the crowd, and Langa was watching him go, a faded *no no* echoing in his mind. Why was Reki leaving him with these girls, these horrible girls? Did he think Langa wanted to talk to them? Did he think Langa would rather be with them than with him?

Langa didn't talk to them. He just stood there, numbly, hovering outside the circle as the girls talked among themselves about teachers and their upcoming summer vacation, waiting for Reki to return. He heard the girl who had invited him to the mixer say, "Okay, the line's dying down, I'm going to go buy something too."

"Oh, Nanami," said another girl, who was Nanami's hand, "can you get me a strawberry cone?"

“Of course,” said Nanami, and she pulled away from the circle. Langa watched her go, all the awful feelings thrumming through his body, and he wished he had never let her convince him to come here. He and Reki would never be able to come to this ice cream truck again without remembering this horrible night, and Langa wanted to sit down on the curb and cry, he was so exhausted. He wanted his bed and maybe his mom (his dad), he wanted to curl up with Reki and sleep for twelve hours and dream of nothing.

Through the broken crowd, he saw Reki holding two ice cream cups, but Reki wasn’t coming toward him, Reki wasn’t moving at all. He was standing near the edge of the truck, nodding, and then saw the short, bobbed hair next to him. Nanami was talking, and Reki was nodding, and Langa’s throat felt raw from all the panic.

He couldn’t leave Reki with her. He couldn’t, but his feet didn’t want to move, he didn’t want to get any closer to that girl.

When he was a few steps behind Reki, he could see Nanami’s red-lipsticked mouth moving. He could hear her voice, naturally pitched too loud. “...thought I would give you some words of wisdom,” she was saying. “These girls, they want a boyfriend, they don’t want a *friend,* you understand?”

“But what’s the—” Reki started, but she shushed him.

“Listen,” she said. “Listen to me. I’ve dated several of the people here, okay? Boys and girls. They don’t want to get to know you. They want to show someone off. They want to tell all their friends they have a tall, handsome boyfriend they can post on Instagram, and they want you to ask them sweet questions about their interests and buy them flowers and keep quiet. They want an accessory, and you always make yourself the center of attention, because no offense, but you never know when it’s better to shut up.”

Anger stabbed through Langa’s stomach, his vision going red, but he held himself back, trying to calm his shaking hands, because Reki was saying in a tense sort of voice,

“So I should just—be quieter?”

“That’s a good place to start,” Nanami said. “And change your hair, okay? That’s not gonna match with anyone’s aesthetic.” She reached out, patting his shoulder, and Langa ground back a shout, because she *shouldn’t touch him.* Nanami disappeared into the line for the ice cream, and Langa saw Reki’s shoulders slump as he kicked at the gravel, like his strings had been cut.

Langa was moving forward before he could remember telling his feet to walk. “Reki,” he said, but Reki turned away from him, brushing his hair out of his eyes and glancing up at the bright streetlights above.

“It’s getting late,” he said, in a voice Langa had never heard before. “We should probably get home, huh? Hey, do you know if anyone’s gonna be at S tonight?”

“I—don’t know,” said Langa, faintly. His hand, which had risen automatically to grab onto Reki, fell back to his side. “Do you...do you want to go?”

Reki was quiet for a long time. Langa’s eyes dropped to the ice creams in his hands, the condensation dripping onto Reki’s fingers, and he swallowed, because Reki had gotten him three scoops instead of two. He must have known Langa hadn’t eaten enough at dinner, and Langa swallowed again, hard. He felt like the lump in his throat would never go away.

“Yeah,” said Reki finally. “Well, I mean, we should probably just go home. I’m not sure if we’ll be able to sneak out tonight, anyway, my mom wants me around to watch my sisters.”

Langa nodded mutely. Reki jolted a little, turning back around, handing Langa his ice cream, and their hands pressed together when Langa took it, and for a moment both of them stood there, staring down at their hands. Langa didn’t want to pull away, and for a long minute Reki didn’t, either, until finally Reki said,

“You should eat it before it melts,” and his voice cracked on *before,* and he took his hand away to rub at his mouth.

“Okay,” said Langa. He struggled to say something else, anything else, but there were so many things in his brain and none of them were words. They were just images—Nanami’s

red mouth saying *change your hair,* a sea of faces that weren't Reki's crowding around Langa's body, the boy he had kissed back in Canada walking away from him. Langa swallowed again, pressing both of his hands to the cold sides of the ice cream cup. "Can I… can I sleep over?"

"Of course," said Reki, and his voice was quiet, so quiet, and Langa's heart thumped painfully.

Reki had never been this quiet before.

Chapter 5

Langa needed to hug Reki, badly.

His hands were itching with the urge, his arms aching, as they climbed off the moped and walked slowly up to Reki's house. The nighttime was full of sounds, birds cawing somewhere, a neighbor's car pulling into a driveway, the jingle of Reki's keys in the doorway, but none of the sounds were *Reki* and Langa kept swallowing, trying to hold his hands against his sides. He just wanted Reki to talk to him, he thought. He just wanted a hug.

But Reki was quiet as he toed off his shoes, kicking them carefully into a pile by the doorway, his hair hanging into his face. Langa balled his hands up into fists because they wouldn't stop itching and his fingers were trembling, and Reki hadn't held onto his waist while they rode home, he had sat backwards and just held onto the moped instead and Langa *needed* him.

"M'gonna go to the bathroom," Reki mumbled, and Langa nodded, even though his bones were starting to hurt, because he wanted to touch Reki, he wanted Reki to touch him, they had been apart for too long tonight and Langa wanted to hold onto his shoulders, at least, *anything* . But he nodded anyway, and Reki went slowly down the hallway, the door of the bathroom clicking shut behind him.

Langa just stood there for a moment, in the middle of the hallway, his hands balled up and his chest pressing against his ribs, a little desperate. He couldn't even see Reki now. He couldn't watch his face to make sure he was okay, and Reki *wasn't* okay, he was in pain, and Langa tried to swallow and then he tried again because Reki was in pain and he was hiding, he wasn't letting Langa help.

Langa pressed himself against the wall, staring down the hallway. He could hear the water running in the bathroom, and the fans going in every room in the tiny house, because Reki's home was never quiet, not even in the dead of night, and that had always been comforting for Langa. His own apartment was quiet all the time. Especially now. Now when Langa came home, the rooms were empty, and no one came to ruffle his hair and say, *How was school, sport?* Reki's house, in contrast, was always lively and full of people who wanted to hang onto his backpack and ask so many questions. *Reki* was always lively, and loud, and he talked a lot and now he wasn't talking at all. The whole way home Reki hadn't said a single word.

Langa's hands shook, and he rubbed them against his pants, but it didn't help, his whole body was starting to tremble now. He had been alone in a crowd of so many people. He had been alone, and Reki had been nowhere, and now Langa was alone in Reki's house and his eyes were starting to blur again. He pressed his hands to his eye sockets, hard, until they hurt, because he had been squinting all night long and trying to hold himself together and now he just needed to sag against Reki's chest and ball up his hands in Reki's sweatshirt and cry.

His legs were shaking so much he thought he wouldn't make it down the hallway, but he did. He could still hear the water running in the bathroom, and he leaned against the doorframe, staring at the handle, willing it to turn. "Reki?" he whispered, his throat dry and hoarse, but a long minute passed and there was no reply.

Langa squeezed his eyes shut. The edges of his vision were beginning to blur with darkness and he couldn't—he couldn't—he couldn't let the world fade out like that again, he needed to be able to see Reki, when he opened the door and Langa could finally hug him. Reki *would* let Langa hug him, he had to. Langa had kept his hands to himself all night long, he hadn't tried to hold Reki's hand, he hadn't tried to get between Reki and the girls and he hadn't tried to hug Reki to his chest, keeping him away from everybody else, he hadn't even though he had wanted to.

He took a shaky, shallow breath, and he could feel the tears starting to build up behind his eyes, even though he tried to swallow them back, he tried so hard to swallow them back. Reki *would* give him a hug. No matter how horrible Langa felt, Reki had always made him feel better, Reki always bandaged up his scrapes and smoothed his hair off his face and smiled until the sun came out from the clouds again.

Langa would be so lost and empty without him.

He felt the first tears slide out of the corners of his eyes and into his hair, cold and wet, and he pressed his sleeve to his mouth. Reki was so wonderful, and nobody understood, nobody saw the sparkle in Reki's eyes when he thought of a new joke, the way he yelled in frustration if he messed up the punchline. Nobody understood the way Reki's mind worked constantly, even if he was sitting in class and pretended to pay attention, when really he was thinking about new skating tricks to try and countless other things, which he always explained to Langa in great detail after school was over. The tears slipped down Langa's face, his hands shaking against his face. He wanted to listen to Reki forever. He wanted to hear

Reki's excited voice again, tripping over itself to get all the words out at the exact same time, and Langa cried harder, sobbing silently into the sleeve of his button-down.

He would never be able to make Reki understand, he didn't have the words to explain, he was so terrible with words. Even when Reki was beat up and exhausted, he was still so wonderful, and Langa could never tell him enough, how incredible he was, how much Langa wanted to soak in his clumsy, disjointed rambling forever.

He cried until he felt drained, until his sleeves were soaked and he had to peel off his button-down, his limbs stiff and fumbling, and stand there in his undershirt, breathing unevenly against his knuckles. Finally the water in the bathroom shut off, and he could hear Reki moving around, and he had to press his knuckles hard against his mouth to stop himself from whimpering. He *needed* Reki, he had never known before just how much he needed him. He needed Reki to be safe and happy and he just wanted them to curl up in his bed and hold each other until all of the terrible feelings went away.

The doorknob turned and Langa's heart throbbed so painfully he nearly whimpered again, and when the door opened he could see Reki's ankles, bare in his too-short pajama pants. The question burned on his tongue, *can I hug you can I please hug you can I please please,*

but when he glanced up the question died in his mouth because Reki's hair was wet, dripping onto his shoulders.

"I just washed that stuff out," Reki mumbled. "I guess it looked like shit anyway."

Langa gaped at him, his mouth parted, his throat dry and no, no, no. *No* , he wanted to blurt, *no, please, you look so good, you look like a warm fire on a cold day, you look like all the colors burned into one, you look like love oh god you always look good.* His throat was so dry, it wouldn't work, and Reki glanced away, the water dripping down his face.

"Are you still hungry?" he asked, and there was something thick in his voice, scratchy. He cleared his throat, and Langa's body burned, because he had so many things he needed to say, crammed into his chest, and he couldn't say *any of them.* "I mean, I know you're hungry," and Reki's voice was so quiet, "C'mere. I can make you food."

No , Langa wanted to say, even though his stomach was empty and aching and it hurt. The water was dripping from Reki's hair and staining his t-shirt a dark gray color and Langa's hands were burning, he wanted to hug him, *please god let me hug him.* He tried to speak. "You don't," the words wobbled, he couldn't say them, he couldn't say any of them, "you don't have to feed me."

"I'm gonna, I'm a good host," said Reki, and when he glanced up Langa could see the deep brown of his eyes, and his throat closed up and his hands shook again, so much harder, against his thighs. Then Reki looked away again, and his fingers touched Langa's arm, closing loosely around his wrist, and the touch made Langa's body flush, hot and trembly and he could barely stop himself from sobbing again as Reki led him down the hallway.

In the kitchen Reki turned on a small lamp and stuck waffles into the toaster. "My sisters do this," he said quietly, and when he let go of Langa's hand, Langa bit down on his tongue, hard, watching Reki fumble around the cabinets. Langa pressed his hands against his thighs, because they were itching again, and he wanted to latch onto Reki's sweatshirt, he wanted Reki to hold him. Reki mumbled a quiet curse to himself as one of his plastic cups toppled down onto the counter, bouncing silently against a dishtowel.

"Can I," Langa said, but then the words sputtered out, too quiet to hear, and Reki glanced at him across the kitchen.

"What?"

Langa swallowed. He didn't know how to say what he wanted, because what he wanted was to wrap his arms around Reki and ball up his shaky hands in his sweatshirt and bury his face in his hood. "Can I, um. Can I stand with you?"

Reki's eyebrows furrowed together, that tiny wrinkle in his forehead that Langa had always wanted to touch, and Langa swallowed again, pressing his hands hard against his legs. His body was starting to feel brittle and shaky with the effort of holding back, like he would fall apart if Reki didn't touch him soon. "Of course," said Reki, sounding confused and tired, very tired. "C'mere, they'll cook fast."

They came together at the toaster, their arms brushing, and Langa wanted to sob with the relief of Reki's body warmth, even though it was a small touch, barely the ghost of one. He

pressed his hands against the edge of the counter so he wouldn't try to grab Reki. "You're so nice," he managed, and Reki turned his face to look at him.

In the darkness Langa could see the tightness of Reki's face, he could hear the way Reki was trying so hard to keep his voice steady when he said, "What?"

Langa fumbled with the words. None of the words were right—none of them captured just how wonderful Reki was, how caring, how gentle. "I...you're so nice," he said again. "I, um. I didn't even remember I was hungry until you said...and you offered to make me food, even though we just ate."

Reki was quiet for a moment, staring up at Langa's face, and when Langa swallowed, he could see the way Reki's eyes flickered down to his throat. Reki swallowed, too. "It's nothing," he said. "It's just, it's just being polite. I know you're hungry, so you should eat."

Langa nodded, swallowing again, trying to hang onto the way Reki's arm pressed briefly against his own. Reki was so kind, acting as if anyone could see all the tiny ways Langa needed taking care of, as if anyone would take care of Langa just as good as Reki did. *I need a hug,* Langa wanted to blurt. *Please, please, I just want to hug you, I just need you to be okay.*

The toaster popped up, and Reki put the waffles onto the plate, just one plate, for Langa, and Langa could feel his throat tighten again, aching with all the unshed tears. He could see the way Reki's hands trembled as he found a fork in the kitchen drawers. Reki was in pain and he was still trying to be good to Langa, as if Langa's empty stomach was more important than his broken fucking heart, and Langa just wanted to lean against his chest and cry and cry until he was exhausted.

He followed Reki slowly back into the bedroom, where the blankets were rumpled, Reki's clothes scattered everywhere, and they sat on the bed, the plate in Langa's lap. Langa ate quickly, his stomach burning, and when he finished and set the plate aside with shaky hands he thought that now was the time. Reki was sitting right in front of him, their legs bumping together on the bed, and Langa could just ask, he could just say, *May I please have a hug* and Reki would probably say yes, so Langa opened his mouth, and

“Did you,” Reki said, and the words died in Langa’s throat, his heart beating double time against his ribs. He pressed his hands under his thighs to stop them from trembling so much, and Reki swallowed, looking at the bed between them. “Did you meet anybody you liked?”

“Wh-what?”

“Tonight,” said Reki, the words wobbling. “Did you meet anyone?”

Langa stared at him, a cold sort of feeling trickling into his chest. Did Reki think Langa had been thinking about—about girls tonight? God, *all* he could think about was Reki, how much he needed him, how much he wanted to curl their bodies together and cry, how much he wanted to hold Reki’s face between his palms and whisper, haltingly, how *good* he thought Reki was.

“I...no.” *Of course not.* “Did you?”

Reki blinked, once and then again, quickly, his hand coming up to rub at his mouth before he said, “No,” and then he laughed a little, against his hand, a horrible little choked-up sound. “I wouldn’t’ve been...I wouldn’t’ve been good enough, anyway, even if I did.”

Langa pressed his mouth closed, trying to swallow, trying not to cry. His chest was so heavy, and it wasn’t *fair,* it wasn’t fair that Reki felt so small and so awful when Langa was so full of things he loved about Reki, things he wanted so badly for Reki to know but couldn’t figure out how to tell him. “That’s not true,” he choked out, and he could feel his eyes stinging again, raw already from how much he’d cried tonight, and Reki shoved his knuckle into his mouth, biting down, and in the moonlight Langa saw the first tear slide down his cheek.

Langa’s heartbeat was pounding in his chest, in his ears, in his palms and for a moment Reki began to blur in his vision, and the tears welled up in his eyes again.

“No,” he blurted, “no, no,” and he needed to be able to see Reki, he rubbed at his eyes until he could feel the skin burning, raw and sensitive, and then he grabbed onto Reki’s shoulders, the tears slipping down his own face, too fast to blink away. “You’re not...you are...you *are* good enough, you’re…”

“Langa,” Reki choked out, and Langa blinked furiously, trying to bring Reki’s face back into focus, his wet hair and his wet face and his eyes *god his eyes,* swimming with tears, and before Langa knew what he was doing, he was holding Reki’s face in his hands, his fingers rubbing at the tears, sliding on Reki’s skin.

“No,” Langa whispered, hoarse, because he didn’t know what else to say, he didn’t have enough words. “You’re perfect, you’re…”

“Sorry,” Reki said, and the word cracked, and he screwed up his eyes, and Langa clung to his face, his head thundering in his chest, and he wanted to hug Reki so badly so badly *so fucking badly* it was like he was going to die if he couldn’t squeeze his arms around him. “Sorry, it’s just, it’s a lot, y’know, I just...I just wanted to be...to be good and…”

“You are good,” and Langa could feel himself crying now, too, “you *are* .”

Reki sobbed, the smallest most painful sound, and Langa could feel his heart breaking into so many tiny fucking pieces, and then Reki lunged forward, his arms going around Langa’s body and his face burying in Langa’s shoulder and Langa nearly toppled over, the feeling of Reki’s skin burning all over him, a hot flush over his whole body like relief.

He buried his own face in Reki’s hoodie, his eyes wet, his hands shaking. He could feel Reki’s raspy, uneven sobbing against him, their chests pressed together, their legs jumbled up in the blankets as they held each other so tightly that Langa could barely breathe. Reki was still crying, and Langa’s hands found Reki’s wet hair, running through the tangles, over and over and over until he could feel Reki sniffling against his collar.

He pulled away, just slightly, so he could see Reki’s face, flushed and raw in the moonlight, the tears still sliding out of his eyes. His eyelashes were wet, Langa realized, and the wrinkle was forming between his eyebrows again, like he was struggling to hold himself together, and before Langa could stop himself, he leaned forward and pressed his mouth to that wrinkle. Reki’s breathing stuttered, the tears pouring out, and Langa pulled away and held his face, tightly, in both hands.

“Sorry,” he whispered, and he could hear how strained his voice was. “Sorry, I shouldn’t’ve…”

“No,” Reki managed. “S’okay.”

Langa’s heart clenched. Carefully he kissed the spot again, and Reki let out a shaky breath, the water from his wet hair dripping cold onto Langa’s nose before he pulled away. Reki’s eyes were still brimming with tears, but he looked up at Langa, and Langa swallowed, because the overwhelming *feelings* were rising up in his throat again.

“Sorry,” he whispered again, because his hands felt clumsy on Reki’s face, and Reki blinked, more tears slipping out. He shook his head, rubbing at his eyes, and said, voice cracking,

“S’good,”

and his hands found Langa’s upper arms and *squeezed.*

Langa’s heart burned in his chest. He thumbed at the tears on Reki’s cheeks, feeling the shuddery breath go through Reki’s body, and then he leaned in again, pressing his mouth to Reki’s face, right under his eye. Reki’s breath hitched on a small sob, so Langa did it again, kissed his cheek, the skin there rough and chapped from all the crying, the tears wet and cold against his mouth.

Reki’s hands squeezed his arms again, so Langa moved to his other cheek, kissing the skin there, trying to kiss away all of Reki’s tears. He kissed Reki’s nose softly and the corner of his mouth, and he saw the way Reki’s lips opened, no sound coming out, his mouth full and swollen in the darkness, and Langa’s chest ached, because he wanted to kiss Reki there, too, on the mouth, he wanted to kiss him until everything felt better. But he knew that wouldn’t help, so he kissed Reki’s cheeks instead, again and again, cupping Reki’s face in his hands until finally his breathing began to slow, evening out, and his hands relaxed on Langa’s arms.

Langa pulled away, but Reki dragged him back, resting their foreheads together. Langa could feel the flush on his own skin, the warmth of Reki’s breathing, and they were so close that he

could feel every rise and fall of Reki's chest. "Sorry," Langa whispered again, into the space between them, and Reki shook his head.

"S'okay," he whispered. "It felt...it felt good." He opened his eyes, and for a moment they just looked at each other, and Langa couldn't breathe because Reki's eyes were so big and bright and then Reki glanced down at his mouth.

Langa swallowed. Reki took his hand away from Langa's arm, touching it to his jaw, his thumb brushing the bottom of Langa's lips. Langa tried to swallow again, but now he was burning from the touch, the pad of Reki's finger rough and callused against his mouth. Reki let his hand fall, but then he whispered,

"Can I...just once? I…"

Langa nodded, even though he wasn't sure what Reki was asking, he could only hope, and Reki let his eyes sink closed again before leaning in.

Their mouths pressed flush together, and Langa squeezed his eyes closed, too. Reki's mouth was cold and wet, but his hands had fallen into Langa's lap, resting on his thighs, and their legs were tangled together, pressing close in so many places. Reki breathed in without pulling away, and Langa kept his eyes tightly shut, because he was afraid that if he opened them, all his emotions would pour out, all of the feelings for Reki that he had bottled up, all the love he wanted so desperately to give him.

The kiss lasted a long time. When Reki finally pulled away, Langa could still feel the touch lingering on his mouth.

"One more time?" Reki whispered, and Langa nodded, mouth aching, and Reki kissed him again, more quickly, and then whispered, almost to himself, "One more," and Langa felt the press of his lips again, and again, and he could feel his heart crushing against his ribcage, desperate to be freed.

Finally they fell apart. Reki's hands still lay upturned in his lap, and Langa made fists in the hem of Reki's sweatshirt. "Are you—" Langa's voice cracked. "Are you okay?"

Reki nodded. His eyes were red, and he rubbed at his mouth, his teeth scraping against his knuckles. “M’gonna be,” he said, and Langa searched his face for signs of more tears, but Reki seemed to all cried out, his body sagging. “Wanna sleep? I’m so tired, I…”

“Yeah,” Langa managed. He could still feel the press of Reki’s mouth to his lips, and he imagined the emotions bleeding from Reki’s body into his own, even though he knew Reki didn’t have those kinds of feelings for him, it was only Langa’s weak stupid heart making up things. He wanted to kiss Reki again, on the forehead maybe, or on his damp hair, his beautiful hair, but he made himself hold back. He needed to put Reki to bed, because maybe nobody ever did that, Reki was so good at taking care of everyone else but maybe tonight he needed somebody to take care of him instead.

Clumsily Reki shoved the blankets down the bed so they could slide under them, their feet bumping together, and when he had dragged the quilt up to their chests, Langa whispered, “Can I—can we hug?”

“Uh-huh,” mumbled Reki, and they found each other’s bodies under the blankets, pressing their knees together, Langa’s arms safely around Reki’s torso. He squeezed, feeling the softness of Reki’s hoodie under his arms, and when he breathed out, it was like a sigh, his body relaxing against the mattress. *Finally,* he thought, *finally.*

“Thanks,” Reki whispered into the dark, into the quiet. “For...for you know.”

Langa didn’t know what he meant, but he nodded against the pillows, smoothing his hands up and down Reki’s back, the wonderful curve of his spine. Reki cuddled against him, their foreheads nearly touching on the pillows, and Langa closed his eyes, listening to Reki’s breathing until it had evened out all the way, into a deep sleep. Then, finally, Langa allowed himself to kiss him one more time, on the knuckles, right where Reki had bitten them.

Langa awoke to the banging of pans, the loud voices of Reki’s sisters, calling over each other, “Mommy! Mommy!”

He lifted his head, groggily, from the pillows. Outside the open window, birds were singing, and the noise of the Sunday morning traffic floated up from the street, and he could hear Reki's sister squabbling over who got to crack the eggs in the pan. He squinted blearily at the clock. It was nearly ten-thirty, at least an hour later than they usually slept.

He glanced down. Reki had his arms bundled around Langa's body, his face smushed into Langa's chest, and quietly Langa settled back down on the pillows next to him, gazing at Reki's crooked hairline, the cowlicks sticking up at all angles. Carefully, so he wouldn't wake him, he settled his hand into Reki's hair, petting the crumpled pieces that had dried funny in the night, smoothing them away from his face. Reki looked adorable in his sleep, his eyelashes sticking to the tops of his cheeks, his open mouth pressed to Langa's sternum, and Langa's body filled with the familiar ache of love for him, an ache he was beginning to think would never go away.

The memories from last night came filtering back through the bright sounds of the morning, and Langa petted Reki's hair more incessantly, trying not to think about the horrible things those girls had said to him, the terrible way they made him feel. Reki mumbled in his sleep, snuggling against Langa's body, and he felt Reki's socked toes brush against his ankle. Langa buried his mouth in the pillows so he wouldn't make a sound.

Reki had cried in his arms last night. Langa had kissed the tears off his face. He could feel a flush crawling up his neck at the memory, shifting under the blankets, a bit ashamed of himself. Why had he thought that would be appropriate? Reki had been a mess, and Langa had taken advantage of him, probably, just like he had taken advantage of him with this whole practice kissing thing. Reki wouldn't want to kiss him if he knew the way it made hot thrills go up and down Langa's body, if he knew the way it made Langa's stomach squirm. Reki would probably wipe his mouth off if he knew that, he would probably feel a little uncomfortable. Reki wanted a girlfriend, and last night he had been upset because no girls wanted him back, and no matter how much Langa wanted him, it wouldn't be enough, it wouldn't, so—

"Reki?"

There was a rap on the door, and Langa jolted, his hand digging into Reki's tangled hair, and Reki made a noise in his throat, burrowing deeper into Langa's chest. Langa's heart was beating a little too quickly, even though it was just Reki's mom, and he wasn't doing anything *wrong,* they were just cuddling, he was just—

“Reki, wake up!” It was one of the girls now, jiggling the door handle. “Come see the smiley face I made!”

Langa tried to calm his beating heart. He ducked his head, trying to find Reki’s jaw in the warm press of their bodies, trying to hook his fingers under Reki’s chin. “Reki,” he whispered in his ear. “Wake up.”

Reki groaned, shifting against him, and Langa suppressed a shiver as Reki’s hand pressed to his hip, his thin undershirt riding up. Reki had never touched his bare skin like that, they were always wearing clothes, and Langa took a moment to thank every god in the universe because just the brush of Reki’s fingers on his waist was enough to make his brain go fuzzy.

“Reki.” His mom rapped on the door again, but Reki didn’t move, so Langa cleared his throat, trying to move Reki’s hand off him so he could think.

“I, um.” His voice came out too high-pitched, scratchy from sleep, and Langa cleared his throat again quickly. “I’m here, Kyan-san. Reki is asleep.”

“Langa-kun!” said the girl’s voice. “Mommy, can Langa-kun eat breakfast with us?”

“Of course,” said Reki’s mom, and Langa felt a little embarrassed, trying to squirm away from Reki’s grasp even though a part of him wanted to sink into the pillows and blankets and dream the whole day away. “Langa, sweetie, see if you can get him out of bed, alright? I can’t promise you it’ll be easy.”

“Okay,” said Langa, still embarrassed, and he bent over Reki’s ear again. “Reki!”

Reki made a garbled noise, rolling over, his hand catching in Langa’s t-shirt and pulling it with him. Langa’s neck flushed hotter at all the skin left exposed, and he quickly wrenched the t-shirt away again, pulling it down over his stomach.

“D’wanna’g’up,” Reki mumbled.

“Your sisters made breakfast,” Langa whispered. “They want you to eat with them.”

Reki squinted his eyes open, and Langa’s heart thumped a little, traitorously. Just last night those eyes had been glassy with tears and now Langa’s heart was getting all poundy over them again, because apparently he had no sense of what was appropriate, and he could feel the flush rising up to his face. Reki fumbled with the blankets, his hand coming up and touching the side of Langa’s face and Langa pressed his mouth closed, hard, because he knew his skin was probably burning up against Reki’s palm.

Then Reki’s eyebrows creased together, and he let his hand fall again. Langa swallowed, and Reki closed his eyes, rubbing at them, and mumbled, “M’sorry ‘bout last night.”

“No,” said Langa, automatically, “no, don’t be—”

“I fucked up,” Reki mumbled, sort of to himself, kicking at the blankets tangled around their feet. He opened his eyes again and looked at Langa, and Langa’s heart beat harder against his chest, his ribs painfully constricting, trying not to remember the way Reki had kissed him last night through the tears, like all he wanted to feel in that moment was Langa.

“No you didn’t,” Langa said. “You were—you were fine, it was just, it was those girls, not you.”

Reki’s eyes slid to the ceiling, his hair falling off his forehead when he tilted his face back against the pillows. “I talked too much,” he said, and even though his voice was still croaky from sleep, Langa could hear the deep sadness weighing in his tone, like Reki was disappointed in himself.

“No,” Langa said, stumbling over the words. “No, I like—I mean—I mean it’s nice when you talk. I think, um. You’re good at it. You’re good at talking.”

Reki glanced at him, and the corners of his mouth twitched up, just a little. “Thanks, man,” he said, even though Langa could tell that Reki wasn’t taking him seriously.

“I mean it,” he insisted.

“Sure you do,” said Reki. “But only ‘cause you’re interested in the same stuff as me, other people don’t care about that.”

Langa’s words stuck in his throat. Maybe that was true, but his heart still felt weird, and it was hard to work out a response. “Well,” he said, and then hesitated. “The, um. The right person will...will care about it, too, probably.”

“Probably?”

Langa’s face was hot. “I—”

“I’m just teasing,” said Reki, but even when he smiled, Langa knew he was still hurting. That kind of hurt didn’t go away overnight. Even Langa still felt drained, his limbs a bit achy, and nobody had said anything awful to *him.* The only problem in Langa’s life was his stupid, heartsick self.

Reki sat up, but he didn’t throw the blankets off, he just crossed his legs so they bumped against Langa’s chest, playing with the corner of the quilt. He was so pretty in the morning light, and no matter how hard Langa tried to look away, to watch Reki’s hands instead, he couldn’t. Nobody else understood how pretty Reki was, because no one else got to see the mess of his hair first thing in the morning, the flush of sleep on his apple cheeks, the freckles dusted below his collarbone when his hoodie slid down at this angle, gaping around his neck. Reki was so pretty, and even when Langa swallowed, he couldn’t push the thoughts down, they stayed lingering in his mouth, as if he could just open his mouth and *say* them.

“I was thinking,” Reki began, and his fingers released the quilt and latched onto the hem of Langa’s t-shirt instead, and Langa’s breath stuck in his throat again. He kept his eyes on Reki’s face, but now all his senses were focused on the place where Reki’s knuckles brushed against his stomach as he twisted the t-shirt around. “Last night, I was thinking. It’s just a thought. I mean, you can say no, it’s not...it wasn’t part of our deal, I was just thinking…”

“What?”

Reki made a face. “Okay,” he said. “Tell me if it’s stupid. It’s probably stupid. I was just thinking that, like, last night was kind of like a date, right? I mean, not really, but kind of. And I fucked up.”

“No,” said Langa, “you didn’t, you just—”

“I messed up,” Reki said, putting his hand over Langa’s mouth, and Langa could only make a *mmph* sound against his palm, which smelled like sweat and like sleep, and Langa could feel his face beginning to burn. God. He could feel Reki’s skin against his mouth, and Reki’s other hand resting on his stomach, and he just *knew* Reki could see the heat rising on his cheeks.

His own hands twitched on the mattress, but he didn’t move to push Reki off (because god Reki was *touching* him, he was touching Langa’s body and *god)* and Reki said,

“I’ve never been on a date, okay? I didn’t want to tell you ‘cause it’s embarrassing but I’ve never even been to a group date or a mixer or anything. I only ever go to dinner with my mom.”

“We go to dinner together,” Langa said, against his palm, and Reki took his hand away, and Langa made a face to cover up the way his stomach fluttered at the way Reki flicked his forehead.

“I know,” Reki said. “And that’s, like—that’s always okay. It’s easy, y’know, with you? I always feel good after we hang out.”

Jesus.

“And,” Reki continued, oblivious to the blush Langa could feel darkening on his own face, “I was thinking, y’know, if it was with Langa, I would totally nail a date. And I know you’d be

good at that stuff too. All the girls loved you last night, they all wanted to sit next to you, and you would be able to tell me if I was talking too much or whatever, or if I wore the wrong clothes, or—uh, I don't know. I don't really know what you're supposed to do on a date."

Langa stared up at him. There was a faint blush across Reki's face, and he wouldn't look Langa in the eye, his gaze was trained on his fingers, where he was pulling Langa's t-shirt away from his stomach, and Langa could feel the inch of skin exposed and his neck burned.

"I—what are you trying to say?"

"I don't know," said Reki, almost defensive, and he tugged hard on Langa's shirt and then released it, dropping his hands back into his lap. "Okay, I do know. I was thinking that—that we should go on a date. Like, just for practice! It'll be good practice, and we can learn what to do and the right stuff to say and everything and it'll be good, like, it'll be good 'cause it's us and we get each other."

For a moment Langa forgot to think. All he could see was Reki and his red hair lit up with the warm sunshine and the wrinkle between his eyebrows, focused on his hands in his lap and god. *It'll be good.* It would be good, of course it would be good, Langa had always wanted to go on a date with Reki, he had a whole folder on his phone of ideas for places they could go and he swallowed, hard.

Reki didn't want it like *that.* He didn't want to hold hands all day and stare into each others eyes, all gooey and awed, he just wanted...for practice.

"Um," Langa said, and Reki quickly said,

"We don't have to! Sorry, I knew—fuck. I knew you would think it was awkward. It's probably 'cause you're Canadian, I should have thought of—"

"No," said Langa hastily. He knew Reki always did this when he got panicked, blaming things on Canada even when the excuse made no sense. "No, it's okay. We can—we can go on a date."

His mouth sort of hurt, saying those words. He had imagined so many different ways of saying them, but never like this.

“Yeah?” Reki looked up at him, like he was checking to make sure Langa was serious, then he grinned, and Langa’s mouth ached even more. He liked that smile so much, and he just wanted Reki to keep on looking that way forever, instead of the awful way he had looked last night.

“Yeah,” he said, and he tried to smile back, even though his face felt stiff and clumsy.

“Cool!” said Reki, and he leaned closer, for a moment, and Langa’s mouth went dry like Reki was going to kiss him, and *oh god Reki was going to kiss him,* and he was already closing his eyes when Reki yanked the pillow from beneath his head. “Got you,” said Reki, grinning, his eyes crinkled up and laughing, and the back of Langa’s head ached as he gazed up at him, his face still so close, his eyes sparkling. He was happy, Langa thought, and that was enough, it would have to be enough.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

content warnings: Reki teases Langa about supposedly having inappropriate dreams (pause at "Bad dream?" said Reki knowingly, and ctrl+f to "Reki dropped his hand and scrambled through the sliding doors").

also, there is brief discussion of Reki's dad being kind of shitty (please jump from "I think it looks cool" and ctrl+f to "Reki grinned slowly, bumping his shoulder against Langa's"). thank you, and please read responsibly!

Langa was nervous about going back to school. He kept picturing those girls coming to stand by Reki's desk, laughing at his drawings, and it made his hands all sweaty while he waited outside of Reki's house, wobbling back and forth on his skateboard. The day was warm, and when Reki came bounding out of his front door, he was wearing a tie-dye shirt and an orange headband.

"Langa!" he called, and Langa held out his fist for their knuckle-bump, but Reki crashed right past that, throwing his arms around Langa's body, and Langa nearly toppled off the skateboard. He put his hands on Reki's back, trying to steady himself, trying to shove his heart down from where it had leapt into his throat. Underneath his fingertips, he could feel the bumps of Reki's spine, and when Reki pulled away, Langa couldn't see anything but his red hair and orange headband and big smile.

"Good morning," said Langa, a bit stupidly, and Reki laughed, his hands squeezing Langa's sides before letting go. Langa felt dizzy, maybe from the heat, or maybe from the way Reki's hands had left warm imprints on Langa's torso, which was already starting to sweat.

"I thought of an idea for our date!" Reki said, hopping onto his own board, kicking off so Langa had to scramble to keep up. His heart was still racing as their boards bounced over the cobblestones of the street, Reki's hair waving wildly in the wind, his shirt so colorful that it was impossible to look away.

"What is it?" asked Langa, when he had caught his breath.

“It’s a secret!” said Reki, sounding absolutely thrilled at the prospect, and Langa frowned, their boards bumping over a crack in the street.

“That’s not fair,” he said. “Tell me?”

“Nope!” said Reki, grinning, his arms outstretched, and he looked so happy and free that Langa’s heart thumped in his chest. “Well, not yet. I have to wait to make sure we can pull it off. But you’re going to love it! Oh boy, I’m excited.” He jumped over the curb, and hastily Langa did, too, wobbling a little, holding his arms out for balance. When he got into the zone of skateboarding, he forgot all about needing to balance, but somehow when he and Reki were just riding around like this, Langa kept getting distracted by how bright and colorful Reki was, how loud and excited his voice got. It usually ended in him wiping out on some street corner while Reki laughed his ass off before helping him up.

But today Langa managed to stay upright as they raced through the sidewalks, under the shop signs and the fluttering flags. “Give me a hint,” Langa said, as they whipped around a corner, Reki’s hand catching briefly on his shoulder.

“Okay,” said Reki. “Let me think. Oh, it will be competitive! Well, there’s gonna be a competitive part of it. I feel like—a date should have high stakes, you know? And nothing gets your blood pumping like some good ol’ competition.”

He grinned at Langa, and Langa made a face, because he already *knew* his blood would be pumping on his date with Reki, god, his *date with Reki.* The words still felt surreal. Reki had been texting him all night about the date, all the things he wanted to practice (holding hands in public, paying the check for each other, thinking of romantic compliments) and Langa had kept his face buried in his pillow to stop himself from screaming.

If Reki seriously tried to *practice* paying him a romantic compliment, Langa’s blood was going to start pumping right out of his body.

They hopped off the boards at the school gates, Reki’s shoulder knocking against his affectionately, and Langa wracked his brain for a date idea that Reki would consider competitive. Maybe they were going bowling, he thought, or maybe Reki was just going to

bring him to S and claim it was romantic. That would be okay, even if it wasn't particularly date-like, because Langa would go anywhere with Reki, and he liked going to S. Anywhere they went could be like a date, if only Reki wanted it to be, but of course he didn't, so Langa tried to shove those thoughts down.

Reki bumped into some of his friends on the steps, and as they shoved each other around and joked about the upcoming math test, Langa took out his phone and looked at the list of date ideas he had written down, trying to figure out if any of them were competitive enough. One of them was *go snowboarding and try not to get Reki killed,* but that didn't seem feasible...unless—

"What're you doing?" Reki asked, throwing his arm over Langa's shoulders, and Langa jumped, nearly dropping the phone. Reki leaned over his arm, and before Langa could fumble to close the window, Reki had taken his phone right out of his hands.

Shit, Langa thought, frantically, because he had put embarrassing stuff on that list, including *try to cut each other's hair and see who looks better* and *search houses for sale and skate past them to decide which ones we would want to buy* and *eat chocolate in bed without shirts on.* Reki's friends were still pushing each other around the stairwell, laughing loudly, and when Reki looked up at Langa, he was grinning, and Langa's heart pounded against his ribs.

But Reki just said, "Were you trying to guess what my idea is? It's not any of these," and he passed the phone back to Langa, elbowing him. "Do you really think I would let you cut my hair? Well, scratch that. You're great at hair, I forgot. But you shouldn't trust me with a pair of scissors for more than two seconds flat."

"I," Langa began, but thankfully Reki got distracted again before he had to think up a believable excuse, and then the bell rang, and Langa followed Reki quietly into class. His fingers itched on the phone, still embarrassed. He needed to get better at paying attention to his surroundings, he thought. Reki could have caught him looking at the folder of photos he had of Reki sleeping, or the shopping cart of presents he wanted to buy Reki for Valentines if he ever got up the courage, or the playlist he had titled *songs for when you're thinking about your best friend who you're in love with (reki edition).*

Now that he thought about it, he should probably put a password on his phone.

At lunch, Langa got another confession.

It was a horribly awkward affair. The girl was a first-year, and she was clutching an envelope with hearts on the front and bouncing nervously, and she reminded him so much of Reki, with her wild hair and big, pleading eyes. But of course Langa had to say, “Um, no, thank you,” and when he did, she started crying, trying to stifle the sounds with her uniform sleeves, and Langa’s palms sweat so much that his pockets were damp from rubbing his hands against them.

Finally he escaped. He hoped Reki wouldn’t be jealous or upset, the way he sometimes got when watching Langa get confession after confession, especially after Saturday night. But when Langa rounded the corner, he saw Reki sitting on the bottom of the stairs with Yua, and he froze.

Oh no, he thought, his palms starting to sweat again, because what if she was saying something terrible to him? If she hurt him—but then Reki threw his head back and Langa heard him laughing, and when he got closer he could hear Reki saying, “—is a really good idea!” Langa paused a few feet in front of them, unsure if he should interrupt, but Reki caught sight of him and began waving erratically, and Yua scrambled to her feet.

“Langa-kun,” she said, sounding a little flustered. “I’ll let you guys be alone! See you in class, Reki!”

“Okay!” said Reki. He scrambled up, too, grabbing Langa’s arm, his grin so wide that Langa’s heart thumped, because, god. They were standing so close and Reki looked so happy to see him and Langa was *not* going to be able to handle this level of affection much longer. His heart was too fragile, and his brain was already deciding that this was exactly the way Reki would greet him if they really *were* dating.

“Was she being rude to you?” was the first thing that came out of Langa’s mouth, and he winced at himself, because why had he thought that would be a good thing to say? Reki didn’t want to think about the girls’ rudeness. Langa shouldn’t remind him.

But Reki just shook his head, hair flopping around, and said, “She was giving me advice for our date!”

Langa’s brain paused. “What?”

“She was giving me—”

“You told her about the date?”

“Well, yeah,” said Reki. “Don’t worry, I didn’t say it was with you! She just asked me about if I was dating anybody, and I told her not really but that I was planning this really exciting date. And she seemed interested, so I told her about it, and she had lots of great ideas!”

Langa stared at him, his mind spinning. Reki tugged him toward the stairs, chattering at a mile a minute about the *preparation* they needed to do for the date, but Langa couldn’t focus on anything he was saying. If this date was just practice for the dates Reki would go on with girls, why was he *telling* the girls about it? At this rate everybody was going to think Reki was taken. And wasn’t *Langa* supposed to be the one giving Reki dating advice? Wasn’t that the whole point of the practicing thing?

Langa stumbled up the last couple of steps onto the roof, and Reki plopped down in their usual spot, dumping his food out onto his skateboard like it was a table. “So what do you think?” he asked, and Langa shook his head, trying to clear his mind.

“What?”

“Were you not listening to me?”

“Um.” Langa didn’t want to admit that his mind had been wandering, but he was a terrible liar. “Can you repeat it?”

Reki grinned at him, pressing their shoulders together as Langa sat down, the line of his body warm against Langa's sleeve. "Of course, man," he said. "I was just saying, we should go to the mall this week, so we can buy new clothes for the date. Yua was saying, like, you wanna look your best on the first date, and it would be good to figure out what stuff looks good on us so we can be prepared in the future!"

Langa watched his feet balance against the edge of the skateboard, his fries wobbling precariously. "Oh," was all he could think to say, trying not to think about all the people Reki wanted to look good for—people he would eventually bring on real first dates. "I've never been to the mall. Is it close?"

"We'll have to take the train," said Reki. "But it's not too far! And there's tons of cool stuff. I love buying stuff, but my mom says it's not a good idea to go shopping very often, except this time it'll be okay because it's a special occasion, you know? We have to find out what colors look good on us and stuff. Yua said that's super important."

Langa hesitated. He wanted to say that he thought Reki looked good in every color, but then he thought about getting to walk around a mall with Reki and watch him point to every single thing that Langa would never have noticed on his own. He nodded. "Okay," he said. "I don't know anything about clothes, but I'll go with you."

"I'll help you!" said Reki. "I'm great at buying clothes. You can find the craziest stuff and then just *wear* it, it's awesome."

Langa watched him dig into his lunch. Reki always wore all the brightest colors together, sunset orange and electric blue and neon pink, and it always looked good to Langa, the way he could find Reki in a crowd more quickly than anyone else. With Reki, it didn't matter if Langa was bad at remembering people's faces, because everything else about Reki was memorable.

Reki pushed the skateboard toward him, making a sound through his food like he was offering Langa the fries, and Langa was careful only to take a few, and not all of them. As they ate, Reki talked about all the different stores they could visit, and Langa thought about Reki trying on clothes for him, soft sweatshirts and patterned button-downs and thin t-shirts, and he flushed warm, hands fumbling on his chopsticks.

What if Reki wanted to practice holding hands in public when they went to the mall? God. This was like — like a practice date *for* the practice date, how had they gotten in so deep?

"Ask your mom if we can go after school on Wednesday," Reki said, through a mouthful of fries, and Langa nodded, his mind already spinning ahead to thoughts of riding the train with Reki, of exploring a new place with him, of Reki's hand sliding into his own, their palms pressed together as they walked through racks of brightly-colored clothing. Reki would hold onto him the whole day, like an anchor, like a safety belt, never letting him go.

Sometime between now and Wednesday Langa needed to do something about his sweaty fucking hands.

On Tuesday night, Langa had a nightmare. In the dream his body was frozen. He couldn't move. He was standing by the bleachers behind his school in Canada and there was the blurry shape of a boy in front of him, but no matter how much Langa blinked, the stinging snow wouldn't clear away, and he couldn't see. *I'm sorry,* he was trying to say, but the words kept fading, getting lost among the snow. *I'm sorry. I—I misunderstood.*

You're always misunderstanding, Langa, the boy said.

His voice was sharp and cold when he repeated it, *you're always misunderstanding,* but those words, too, began to fade away, because the boy turned his back and disappeared into the whiteness. Langa's body wouldn't move, he was frozen. He tried to cry out, but he couldn't, he had no words, and he couldn't move, and he was alone, he was alone, he was alone and around him, the world blurred to nothing.

Langa cried out, sitting up, his room spinning around him. There was a scuffling sound somewhere in the apartment, and then his mother opened the door, her hair awry, her dressing gown thrown on hastily. "Baby?"

Langa blinked and blinked and blinked, opening his mouth like a fish, but no sound would come out. His mother closed the door behind herself and settled down on the corner of the mattress, and when she put a hand on his knee, Langa felt his eyes stinging.

“Are you okay?” she whispered. When Langa didn’t respond (*couldn’t respond),* her voice lowered, sadly. “It’s about...it’s about him, isn’t it?”

She meant Langa’s dad, but Langa struggled for his breath and nodded because even though the nightmare hadn’t been about his dad, everything came back to him anyway—if his dad was still here then Langa would never be alone. His mom squeezed his knee.

“Baby,” she said, softly, and Langa choked out,

“It’s okay,”

because he couldn’t tell her about the boy in Canada, he just couldn’t. His body burned with the embarrassment of just *thinking* about it. The words echoed in his mind, harsher and harsher each time: *You’re always misunderstanding, Langa, you’re always misunderstanding, you’re always misunderstanding god why do you misunderstand everything?*

“Come here,” said his mom, opening her arms like she was going to hug him, and then she hesitated, like she thought maybe Langa wouldn’t want to. But Langa did want to, his body was burning up, his throat aching, and it was the middle of the night and he was too wound up to feel awkward hugging his mother.

When he leaned forward, she took him into his arms, stroking his hair, whispering softly to him, simple things like *it’s going to be okay* and Langa trembled against her, trying to breathe, until finally the warmth of the touch bled into his bones enough to allow him to relax.

He remembered something, then, as she rubbed his scalp, her voice soothing in his ear. “Can I go to the mall with Reki tomorrow?” he mumbled, and she stopped murmuring for a moment, quiet in the darkness. Then she chuckled, softly, against him.

“That’s what’s on your mind?”

He was too tired to think. “Reki’s always on my mind.”

She laughed again, squeezing him. “Okay,” she said. “Tell him you can go. But you need to sleep first, alright?”

“Uh-huh.”

She pulled away, fluffing his pillows a little, and Langa lay down, his eyes aching, but even though it was dark he could see his mother’s face. She kissed his forehead, and Langa breathed out, trying to push down the voices in his head, the voices telling him he always misunderstood, that no matter what, he would always misunderstand.

His mother closed the bedroom door quietly behind herself. Langa fumbled for the phone on his bedside table, opening his texts, eyes blurring a little over the bright lines of type. He had fallen asleep in the middle of watching a skating video Reki had sent him, and below the video were twelve more texts he had missed.

did you see that heelflip??? absolute madness

hey langa do u think u could do that but off one of those pipes behind dopesketch

langaaaa

have you finished watching yet

text me when you finish

langa did you fall asleep again????

i guess you were pretty tired earlier

i could see your eyes drooping in english class today, i really wanted to poke you with my pencil but i thought you needed the sleep

you can thank me tomorrow

<3 <3 <3 <3 <3 sweet dreams

langa!!!1!!1 don’t forget to ask your mom about tomorrow

<3

Langa rubbed his eyes, but he was too tired to keep them open, so clumsily he typed, *I asked and she said Yes.*

And then, just before he fell asleep, he remembered to type,

<3

Langa's hands were sweaty all the way to the train station the next day. It was a hot day, so Reki had his hoodie knotted around his waist, and his arms flew around while he talked, coasting next to Langa on the sidewalk. Langa tried not to look at his arms. They were just arms, he told himself, but Reki had gotten a sunburn the other day and so the tops of his arms were red, the dark hair standing out against the burn and Langa couldn't stop swallowing at all the *skin.* The sunburn must be warm to the touch; Langa just *knew* it was.

His shirt stuck uncomfortably under his armpits as they balanced on their boards outside the station, waiting for the train. "Are you zoning out again?" Reki asked, elbowing him, and Langa jumped. "You're probably still tired, aren't you? You texted me at five a.m. last night."

Langa cleared his throat. "I, um. I woke up."

"Bad dream?" said Reki, knowingly, and Langa shifted, pulling his shirt away from his chest to try to get some air. Reki could always read him so easily, he thought, even though Langa had never told him about the nightmares. He was about to nod, but then Reki elbowed him again, digging into Langa's side, and said, snickering, "Or was it a *good* dream?"

It took Langa's brain a moment to catch up, and his face burned. "I—no!"

“I knew it!” said Reki, hopping away when Langa tried clumsily to elbow him back. “I knew it. Of course you were thinking about dirty stuff in your sleep, you big perv.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Don’t deny it!” said Reki, laughing, as Langa tried to grab his shirt, his fingers fumbling over warm fabric as Reki dodged him. “We’re all guys here! You can tell me stuff.”

“I didn’t—”

“Did your mom walk in?” Reki grabbed his hand to stop Langa from punching him in the stomach, and Langa’s whole body flushed hot with the way their palms pressed together, sweat sliding down his back. Reki must have seen the flush, because he grinned, his voice rising gleefully. “Oh my god, she *did!* Langa! Dude! That’s so embarrassing, why didn’t you tell me?”

“That didn’t happen!” Langa said, trying to wrench his hand away, but Reki just laughed, his hair wild in the sun, his cheeks and his nose burned red, and Langa flushed even hotter. God. Reki was thinking about him—no, Jesus, he couldn’t think about that right now, they were in public. He probably would have gone up in flames from the embarrassment, he thought, if the train hadn’t pulled into the station right then, whistle blaring.

Reki dropped his hand and scrambled through the sliding doors, and Langa followed him, trying to catch his breath, still pulling at the front of his shirt, which was sticking to his chest now. Reki found them a seat near the back of the train car, by the windows, but the rest of the car was mostly empty, just a single elderly lady with a newspaper by the doors.

Langa slid carefully into the seat. It was small, and the only way to sit comfortably was with their legs pressed together, their boards crammed under their feet. He swallowed, looking at their knees. Reki had pressed a band-aid over one of Langa’s knee scrapes the other day, and the red and orange stood out against his pale skin, so close to Reki’s bony leg. Reki’s body hair was a lot thicker than his, Langa realized, and for some reason the thought made his throat feel dry and hollow. How had he never noticed before?

“You want some water?” Reki asked, digging into his backpack, and Langa nodded hastily, tearing his eyes away from the way their bare skin touched below the hems of their shorts. He gulped down half the water bottle in one go, crunching the plastic, and Reki laughed. “Trying to cool off from thoughts of your dream,” he started, and Langa kicked at his ankles, flushing all over again.

“Stop,” he said, rubbing his mouth, screwing the lid back onto the bottle. The train began rumbling down the tracks, and he glanced out the window, watching the trees roll by. “How far is it again?”

“About an hour,” Reki said, and Langa made a face, his blood thumping through his veins at just the *thought* of being pressed so close to Reki’s body for an hour. He could feel every time that Reki shifted against him, shuffling his feet around, and every bump of Reki’s arm as he collected the water bottles and stuffed them back into the backpack.

For a while Langa just watched the scenery go by, listening to Reki ramble on about his sisters, and tried not to think about the touching, except when he felt Reki’s shin press against his own for a solid two minutes while Reki bent down to tie his shoes. The only thing he could think for those two minutes was *holy shit he’s sweating oh my god I’m sweating fuck he can probably feel it,* and then Reki sat up and scratched his elbow and Langa caught a flash of neon orange.

He grabbed Reki’s hand before he could drop it, and for a moment they both stared down at Reki’s fingers, the bright orange polish chipped along his nails. “Oh,” said Reki, and flexed his hand, spreading out his fingers so Langa could see. “Tsukihi wanted to play salon last night. She’s been insisting that she’s serious about becoming a beautician, but you know her, every two weeks she has a new dream job that she’s *sooo* serious about.”

“Yeah,” said Langa, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the nail polish, the way it made Reki’s hands look brighter, somehow, more vibrant. The polish was chipped particularly badly on Reki’s thumb, the nail he always chewed in class, and for some reason it made Langa’s stomach feel ragged. He wanted to touch the nails, but suddenly he realized he had been holding Reki’s hand for way too long, and he dropped it quickly.

Reki was watching him. “It’s a little weird,” he said, and his laugh was rueful, self-conscious, as he rubbed his hands on his yellow shorts. “I told Tsukihi—”

“No,” said Langa, hastily, his palms itching to grab onto Reki again. “No, it’s—I think it looks cool.”

“Yeah?” Reki flexed his fingers again, looking down at them, and there was a break in the trees behind him, the afternoon sun shining on his hair, and he said, sort of awkwardly, “My dad didn’t like it. We always had to do it behind his back, like, at night and stuff.”

Langa looked at him, his throat dry again, but in a different way than before. His voice was quieter than he expected when he said, “Really?”

Reki nodded, rubbing at the back of his neck, shifting in the seat so he could prop one foot against the seat back in front of them. “Sometimes he caught us. He always made me go wash it off ‘cause he said it made me look like a girl.”

Langa swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “He shouldn’t have…”

“Yeah,” said Reki, when Langa trailed off. He shifted in the seat again, his knee knocking against Langa’s, and then said, “He was sort of a piece of a shit. I don’t know. I don’t really like talking about it, you know? That’s why I never told you.”

Langa nodded, pressing his own hands into his lap so he wouldn’t try to reach out and lace their fingers together. “Where did he...where did he go?”

“One day when I was twelve he just bounced,” said Reki, shrugging. “He took all our cash, and then we changed the locks on the doors, so we never saw him again, you know? But good riddance, I think. I mean, we’re better off now.”

Langa nodded again. Reki turned his hands over, looking at the band-aids taped to his left palm, and Langa said, awkwardly, “I’m glad he left, then.” Reki glanced up at him, and hastily Langa amended, “I mean—I’m not glad. I mean—I mean I am glad? Am I supposed to be glad?”

Reki grinned slowly, bumping his shoulder against Langa's, the warm press of his skin making Langa's heart clench. "Yeah," he said. "You're supposed to be glad. I know what you mean, man."

He stayed there, their sides touching everywhere from elbow to hip to thigh, and Langa could feel a bead of sweat roll down his neck, but he didn't want to move away. Reki had trusted him enough to tell him this, he thought, and even though Langa had probably said the wrong thing, Reki understood what he meant. Reki always understood him. Well, almost always. It was probably best that he didn't understand what Langa thought about when he lay awake in Reki's bed, listening to the sound of Reki's snoring. He suppressed a shudder at the thought of what Reki's dad would have said if he had caught *them.*

"After your dad…" said Reki, quietly, and then he hesitated. The train rolled into another station, and slowly the elderly woman gathered herself off the seat, leaning heavily on the handrail as she left the train. "I mean, was it lonely in Canada?"

Langa nodded, and Reki sort of leaned against him, for comfort maybe, and Langa's heart clenched again. "Yeah," he said, hesitating, because he wanted to say it was still lonely now, in his empty apartment while his mom was at work, but instead he said, "I didn't go to school for a while. But I don't think anyone really missed me."

"What?" Reki sat up a little, looking at him, and Langa pressed his hands between his thighs. "What about your friends? Didn't they, like, try to take your mind off it and stuff?"

"Not...really," Langa said, averting his eyes, but he could still feel Reki watching him. Reki put his hand on Langa's thigh, and Langa jolted, his heart in his throat, and Reki quickly took his hand away.

"Sorry," he said, but the imprint of his warm fingers was already branded onto Langa's leg, and he struggled to calm his heart down again. God. He was so sweaty, and Reki was so close, and if he kept asking about Canada then Langa was going to blurt out something he never wanted Reki to know.

“They sound like shitty friends,” Reki said, “if they didn’t even stick with you while you were going through that. You deserved better.”

Langa swallowed, struggling to find a way to explain, but there seemed to be no answer except the truth. “I, um,” he said. “I didn’t really have that many friends in Canada. They all sort of...drifted away, I guess. When I was growing up.”

“Really?” Reki was still staring at him, and Langa felt his cheeks prickle, sort of ashamed. He squeezed his hands together.

“I had one friend,” he said, even though his heart was picking up pace, telling him this was a *bad idea, a bad idea, a bad idea.* “His name was Miguel. But he kind of...stopped liking me.”

“What?” Reki sounded as if the idea was completely incomprehensible. “Why?”

“It was…” Langa struggled. “It was a misunderstanding.”

Reki kept watching him, but Langa just picked at a loose thread on his shorts, so after a moment Reki flopped back against the seat. “Man, that sucks,” he said. “He sure missed out. Well, you have me now. Is it bad that I’m kinda glad I don’t have to compete with anybody?”

Langa looked sideways at him. Reki’s nose was scrunched up, and Langa could see the sunburn on his forehead underneath his hair. “It’s okay to be glad,” he said, quietly. He wanted to tell Reki that he was the best friend he’d ever had—that before Reki, he hadn’t truly understood what a *friend* was, a real friend, one who cared about you no matter what. He wanted to tell Reki that his heart still stuttered in surprise every time Reki texted him good morning, or waited for him after school, or told Langa sincerely that he was amazing. But Langa’s throat was too full to say any of those things, so gingerly he leaned against Reki’s shoulder instead, a bit afraid Reki would move away, but Reki allowed it.

They sat for a while in the rumbling train, but Langa wasn’t watching the window anymore, he was just gazing down at Reki’s hand. It was lying on the edge of his shorts, his fingers

slightly bent, the chipped nail polish peeling off his thumb. His hand was so close, Langa couldn't help thinking, if he just moved it over a couple of inches their fingers would brush. Did the nail polish feel smooth? Was it distracting to wear? If Langa asked, would Reki show him how to put it on?

"Hey," said Reki, suddenly, sticking his other foot up on the seat back in front of them. "We have the whole train car to ourselves."

Langa glanced up, his eyes a bit dazed from focusing so long on Reki's hand, and Reki raised his eyebrows at him. For a moment Langa struggled to figure out what he had said, and Reki must have noticed, because he sat up a little and said,

"Nobody's around. Can I try something?"

"Wh—" Langa's voice cracked, and he winced. "What kind of thing?"

Reki shifted in the seat, pulling one knee up awkwardly so he was sort of facing Langa, and Langa's heart began to pound again, his shirt getting caught around his chest. Reki put his hand on Langa's shoulder, and the warm weight of it was enough to make Langa shiver, and then Reki said, "Well, we're sort of in public, but not, you know?"

"Uh—" It was taking all of Langa's willpower not to glance down at Reki's hand, his fingers curling over Langa's shoulder. Reki's eyes were amber in the light. He was so pretty, Langa though distractedly, his heart thumping, no one should have the right to be that pretty.

"I just mean," Reki said, and hesitated. "Well, it's a good way to work ourselves up, you know? I mean someday we're gonna have to kiss in public, probably, so we should learn how to...how to not be nervous, you know?"

Langa swallowed. "But I *am* nervous," he croaked.

“I know, man,” said Reki, and he squeezed Langa’s shoulder. “It’s okay, we don’t have to, if you don’t want to? Sorry. I didn’t mean to, like, freak you out or…”

Langa swallowed again. He glanced around the train, and Reki followed his eyes.

“There’s nobody around,” said Reki, “but I understand if you…”

“When’s the next stop?”

Reki hesitated. “Fifteen minutes, maybe? It’s our stop. But we don’t have to...I mean, it can be quick.”

Langa could feel his heart thumping in his throat. He had never kissed anybody in public before. Maybe somebody would come into the train car and look at them funny, or maybe his hands would get so sweaty that he would leave damp spots on Reki’s shirt. Langa swallowed one more time. “I...we can,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

Langa nodded, because even though he was nervous, once he glanced down at Reki’s mouth he couldn’t look away. Reki’s lips were chapped, a bright red line on the corner where the skin had torn, but Langa wanted to know what his chapped mouth felt like, what it would be like to kiss Reki here, outside of their homes, with their bodies crammed together in this tiny moving train.

“Okay,” said Reki, and he fumbled a little with his position on the seat, his knee pressing to Langa’s thigh now. Langa caught a flash of his orange nail polish when Reki put a hand on his chin, tilting his face, and his throat was dry when he closed his eyes. Reki’s mouth bumped against the corner of his own, nervous, and Reki mumbled, “Sorry.” Langa’s heart thumped, because Reki had never missed his mouth before, and for some reason it made his entire body squeeze tightly.

And then Reki's mouth found his, and Langa could feel the hesitance in the way Reki brushed their lips together, kissing him briefly, pulling away only a centimeter to breathe,

"Okay?"

and Langa nodded. Reki hesitated again, and so Langa leaned forward himself, pressing their mouths back together, and even though his heart was hammering in his chest, he could feel Reki relax slightly, against him. They shared several soft kisses in the quiet of the empty train, the seat rumbling underneath them, and Langa thought his heart would beat right out of his body.

"You have hair in my face," Reki mumbled, pulling away again, using his fingers to brush Langa's hair off his cheek. The band-aid on his palm brushed against Langa's skin, and Langa's face tingled, warm and sensitive. Reki tucked his hair behind his ear, but it slipped back into his face right away, and Reki made this frustrated sound that made Langa's toes curl tightly in his sneakers. Then Reki shoved his fingers into Langa's hair, cradling the side of his head, and this time Langa didn't see the kiss coming until Reki's mouth was firm against his.

Langa choked a little, his cheeks burning, because Reki was holding him so tightly, his fingers tugging the slightest bit on Langa's hair, his mouth hot and dry. Langa could feel the broken skin of Reki's bottom lip when Reki tilted his head, and it was enough to make his stomach clench, hot, his hands tightening on his thighs.

For a moment Langa forgot they were in public; he forgot the train, he forgot the nightmares and their fathers and the practice date. He could only think about Reki, about the way Reki kissed him fiercely, with determination, as if each time was the last time, as if he only had one chance to get it just right.

When Reki pulled away again, he didn't let go of Langa's hair, he just slid his thumb down the line of Langa's neck, and Langa shuddered again, the feeling going all the way down his spine. "Hang on," Reki whispered, frowning slightly, using his other hand to thumb at Langa's bottom lip, and Langa opened his mouth just a little, his heart pressing against his ribs so hard it was almost painful because god, god. Reki took his hand away, his pretty fucking hand with those pretty fucking fingernails, and said, "Don't freak out, but I think I got blood on you."

“Wh—at?”

“It’s not bad,” said Reki, and Langa’s eyes darted to his mouth, where the cut on Reki’s lip had opened slightly. “Here, I’ll…”

He leaned in again, and Langa felt the wet touch of Reki’s tongue against his lips, and he squeezed his eyes shut, heart pounding in his chest, in his ribs, in his tingling hands. God. Reki just….so easily...and Reki pulled away again, puffed air on Langa’s face, and then leaned back in.

This time the kiss was wetter, and Reki slid his tongue along the seam of Langa’s mouth until Langa felt like whimpering into the quiet. Reki’s hand was still in his hair, tugging unintentionally, and when Langa shifted in the seat, the hem of his shorts crumpled against Reki’s knee, pressing to the bare skin there. Langa knew his breathing was heavy and hot, and Reki pulled away again, pressing brief, quick kisses to his mouth, as if he couldn’t leave all at once, and he whispered, “You breathe all funny when we kiss, you know?”

Langa struggled for words—for air. He could feel the blood pounding in his cheeks, and he squeezed his eyes more tightly closed, as if he could somehow disappear into the seat back. “Sorry,” he said, in an embarrassingly scratchy voice, and Reki murmured,

“No, no—girls’ll think it’s cute,” and Langa’s heart only beat harder at the word, *cute,* nobody had ever called him that before, and he could feel Reki’s free hand pressed gently to his chest, to the damp fabric right over his heart, where he was all flushed and sweaty and oh god oh god. “See,” Reki said, so softly, “your heart is beating so fast.”

“Ah—” Langa couldn’t get his throat around any words, fuck, it didn’t matter the language. “I—”

“Are you nervous?” said Reki, taking his hand away, and Langa’s shirt stuck to his skin in the warm place Reki had left behind, and he almost couldn’t bear to squint his eyes open. Almost, but when he did, he could see the red of Reki’s cheeks and hair swimming in his vision and his heart clenched. This was how he was going to die, Langa thought, with his hair clutched in Reki’s clumsy fingers.

“Uh—”

“It’s okay,” said Reki. “Maybe I—I got too caught up.” Finally he detangled his hand from Langa’s hair, letting it brush against his shoulder before he dropped it into his lap, glancing around the train car. “I forgot we were in public,” he said, with a kind of breathless laugh.

“Uh,” Langa managed again, because his brain was still stuck on the way Reki had pressed his hand over his chest. Reki had *felt* Langa’s pounding heart. The flush was so warm Langa thought it must be permanent—Reki had broken him somehow, he was going to feel this way forever: sweaty and tight-chested and like his clothes had shrunk too small to fit him.

“We’re almost there,” said Reki, still sounding embarrassed as he pulled his backpack into his lap, hunting around. He pressed the water bottle back into Langa’s hand. “Here, I saved this for you, I thought you might need it.”

Langa could barely croak a “thank you” as he unscrewed the water and gulped it so quickly he nearly choked. It would never be enough, his body was too warm and itchy and Reki had *felt* how fast Langa’s heart was pounding, Reki *knew,* he knew the exact pace and feeling of Langa’s pulse. Langa rubbed his mouth and crumpled the water bottle in his fist. Reki was gathering their things together now, and his lips were no longer chapped, and Langa swallowed hard at the bashful sort of smile Reki gave him as they stood up.

He would *not* misunderstand this, Langa told himself, over and over as they waited for the train to pull into the station. He would *not.*

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> trigger warning for a panic attack in this chapter. to skip, please pause at "Langa's eyes blurred, panic fierce in his mind" and ctrl+f to "'C'mon,' said Reki, and this time..."
>
> this chapter (and future ones to a certain extent) also contains some internalized ableism related to Langa's anxiety, i.e. he thinks of himself as broken/not deserving of love. please know that I am not endorsing this type of mindset!

"Oh *man!"* said Reki, grabbing Langa's hand. "Look! It's a skating store! Dude, it's like the mall read my mind."

Langa followed his pointing finger, trying to find the skating store among all the others. He was still sweaty from the train ride, flushed from the kissing, and the mall was brighter than he'd expected, and more crowded, full of so many *people* and *things.* Langa was beginning to feel a little dizzy trying to read the signs in Japanese. "Which one?"

"There—hang on, I'll show you!"

Reki tugged him toward the store, and Langa hung onto his hand, trying to focus on the warm clutch of Reki's fingers, his sweaty palm. Even though the colors and sounds whirled around them, Reki was like his anchor, his hand strong and safe, and Langa clung onto him as they hurried into a vibrant, overcrowded store.

"Look at that!" Reki was saying, already, and then, "Look at that, look at that, oh *man* Langa, look at *this!"*

Langa hurried after him, still clinging to his hand, as Reki circled the store once and then twice, pointing to every single thing, even the things Langa didn't recognize. Reki grabbed shoes off the shelves and turned them over in his hands, marveling excitedly about how cool they would look, and Langa stared at his face instead of the shoes, caught up in Reki's voice.

He's so passionate, Langa thought, letting Reki drag him toward the bicycle racks as he exclaimed, "Hey, maybe we could stick one of these on the back of your moped! And then we could use it to carry around our boards! What do you think, Langa?"

Langa nodded.

"Cool!" said Reki, and he started to grab things, flipping over price tags. This time Langa watched his hands, his strong hands with those knobbly knuckles and the band-aids on his palms; Reki's hands could do anything, he thought. The stress from the train ride began to ease away. Reki always had that effect on him—like when Langa was around him, everything felt as easy as coasting down a long, sloping hill.

A half an hour later, Langa's arms were weighed down by a million different things: a set of kneepads, sneakers, tools for Reki's garage, a pair of compression socks. Reki hadn't been kidding when he said he liked to buy things, Langa thought, trying to see over the top of the pile at where Reki was trying on different sunglasses. "Which ones look cooler?" he asked. "These ones or—these ones?"

Langa searched for the right answer, but all he could come up with was, "They both look good."

"Aw, Langa," Reki complained, "you're no help! You say that to everything."

"Well—" Langa said, because he wanted to say that Reki made everything look cool, with his flashy hair and the bright splotches of color on his fingernails, but he bit his tongue, because Reki was now saying,

"Dude, sorry, dude, I gave you too much stuff to carry. Gimme that." He carefully took the flame sweatshirt off the top of the pile and flipped it over, wincing at the price tag. "Aw, man, y'know, I'm never gonna be able to pay for all of this. God, this isn't even what we came here to buy! Why didn't you stop me?"

“We did come for clothes,” Langa pointed out. “That’s clothes.”

“I can’t wear this on a date!” Reki held the sweatshirt against himself, looking down, and Langa held the other items tighter against his chest. The orange of the flames made Reki’s hair look redder—it brought out the faint freckles across his cheeks and the sunburn on his nose.

“Why not?” Langa said, because he couldn’t stop himself. “It looks good.”

Reki made a face. “Are you just saying that because you have no idea what kinds of clothes we’re supposed to be buying?”

“No,” said Langa, and then he hesitated. “Well, maybe. I don’t know. I don’t know how to distinguish between any kinds of clothes.”

Reki heaved a sigh, tossing the sweatshirt over his shoulder, still fingering the price tag. “Me either. Man, we’re already shit at this. Okay. Okay, lemme think. I think I can probably afford the—the kneepads? And the socks. But we better put the tools back. Aw, but—I really wanted to put those new wheels on your board.”

“I can buy the tools,” said Langa. “It’s okay. My mom gave me money this morning.”

Reki squinted at him, and Langa felt his chest warm. Was that wrong, offering to pay for things? He *did* have the money, and he wanted to buy this for Reki, since he seemed so excited about it. He would give all his money just to see Reki happy.

Maybe that *was* a problem.

“Well,” said Reki. “My mom would be so mad if she found out! She says I’m not supposed to accept money from friends.”

“You’re buying it for *my* board,” Langa pointed out. “So it’s fine.”

Reki glanced to the side, poking his tongue into his cheek, like he was trying to talk himself out of it, but finally his shoulders caved. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. Thanks, Langa. Oh, here! I’ll buy you something in return.”

“You don’t have to,” Langa began, but Reki was already plucking a scrap of fabric off the shelves by the sunglasses, turning around and holding it up, looking immensely proud of himself.

“It’s a headband!” he said. “So we’ll match. Here.” Before Langa could blink, Reki moved closer, his chest brushing against Langa’s hands. Langa scrunched up his eyes when Reki reached for his face, smoothing Langa’s hair away from his forehead. His band-aids scraped against Langa’s skin, and Langa’s cheeks prickled, his chest going tight. Reki began to tuck the headband around his head, and Langa could *feel* the heat of his body, the way Reki breathed out into the space between them, making a sort of humming sound in concentration. God. Reki was just...he just…he had no concept of personal space *at all,* did he? They were in public and Reki was just threading his hands through Langa’s hair, nearly chest to chest with him, completely oblivious to the way Langa’s face heated up, his heart pounding.

“There!” said Reki, pulling away, his hands on Langa’s shoulders like he was admiring him, and Langa made a face so maybe Reki wouldn’t see how horribly he was blushing. “You look good! Oh, man, maybe I shouldn’t have tried this. You’re gonna steal my look, it looks way better on you than it does on me.”

“No it—”

“Here, look,” said Reki, pulling out his phone, holding it up. “Smile!”

There was a flash, and Langa scrunched up his face even more, the blush pounding in his face now. God. Reki was taking pictures of him. He was probably going to save these pictures *forever.*

“It looks so good!” Reki continued, twisting around and cramming into the aisle next to Langa, showing him the photos. Just as Langa had feared, his face was flushed bright red, his eyebrows creased together, his hair an absolute mess around his face. The headband was crooked and rumpled, but somehow, when Reki squeezed closer to his side in the crowded store, Langa’s stomach gave a desperate clench of *I never wanna take this off.*

“Okay,” he said, and Reki laughed, elbowing him.

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic!” he said. “I’ll think you’re broken! C’mon, let’s check out.”

“Okay,” Langa repeated, and Reki laughed again, and Langa felt sort of embarrassed, but mostly from the way Reki had grinned so much over the photos. As they waited in line, Langa had the sudden image of those photos as the wallpaper on Reki’s phone, and hastily he tried to shove the thought away, horrified with himself, his cheeks hot with a sort of shame. He shouldn’t—he shouldn’t imagine things like that. Reki wouldn’t want to look at him all day like that.

If Langa knew he wouldn’t get caught, he would have made Reki the wallpaper of his own phone a long time ago, but that was different, because Reki was—well. Langa adored him, that was all. Sometimes he ached with how much he adored him—with the effort of holding all that adoration inside.

“Lemme carry the bags,” said Reki, when they finally left the store. He reached for the shopping bags, but Langa resisted.

“I want to carry them.”

Reki frowned. “Let me.”

“No.”

“Langaaaa.” Reki grabbed one of the bags and yanked hard enough that Langa let go, stumbling backward, and Reki flipped him off. “Ha! Stop trying to be a gentleman all the time.”

“I’m not,” Langa began, the flush starting to rise again, because he *had* sort of wanted to carry all the bags for Reki. It was probably stupid, though, it was a stupid urge, and Langa tried to push the thought away. It was stupid, and what was even stupider was how good Reki looked, just standing there with his body sort of tilted to one side by the weight of the bag, looking up at a map of the mall and mouthing the words to himself. Langa’s stomach clenched. He needed to stop staring at Reki’s mouth; he was going to get caught.

Reki glanced over at him, and Langa’s stomach clenched again. “I think I found a good store!” he said, and then grinned, reaching up to ruffle Langa’s hair, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, heat flushing into his face. “Aw, you look so good, man. It’s kinda unfair.”

“Stop,” Langa managed, barely above a squeak, and Reki laughed affectionately, ruffling harder. When he finally took his hand away, Langa made a face at him, because he just *knew* he looked like a messed-up toddler, or maybe like he had just rolled out of bed with Reki’s hands in his hair. God, he could *not* think about that right now, he could *not,* god Reki’s hands in his hair—

“Let’s go,” said Reki, and then he was pulling Langa along again, and Langa tried to squash down the blush and all the stupid, embarrassing fantasies. It was a good thing Reki was leading them, because Langa could barely walk without stumbling, and he nearly lost his grip on the shopping bag multiple times.

The store they found had surfing shorts and sandals with palm trees on display, and Langa guessed it was exactly the kind of store where Reki usually bought his clothes. Maybe Reki would dress Langa the way he dressed himself, and the thought made Langa’s body flush hot, as Reki’s hand slid down to his wrist, tugging him in between racks of Hawaiian shirts.

He had daydreamed about this before. Last month, Langa’s favorite daydream had been one where Reki dressed Langa in all his own clothes, the gray sweatpants he wore to bed and his tie-dye t-shirt, and then cuddled him in bed until their bodies were sleep-warm and content. In the daydream the clothes always smelled like Reki, the rush of his body when he bounced against Langa while skating, like the warm jostle of his shoulder in his bed. Langa tried

desperately to shove the daydream away as he watched Reki take shirts off the rack, but it just *wouldn't* go away—god, the way he would just *drown* in the feeling of Reki's clothes—

"You wanna pick anything out?" Reki asked, and Langa blinked, his body warm with how close Reki was standing.

"Uh," Langa said, his brain still stuck on the daydream. "I'll just—can you choose for me?"

"Yeah, for sure!" Reki said, sounding delighted. "Here, you can hold stuff, okay?" Langa nodded, and Reki started hanging shirts over his arm. Was this what dating him would be like, Langa wondered as he trailed around the store after Reki—nodding at everything Reki held up, carrying his things? Would Reki let Langa do things for him, small things like hold his shopping bags? It seemed like Langa could never pay Reki back for everything he had done for him, no matter how long he tried. Before he met Reki, Langa hadn't smiled in months. He had sort of forgotten how, but in the blur of an afternoon, Reki had taught him again, Reki had taught him how to laugh and how to skate and how to be somebody's friend.

Langa watched Reki pull sandals off the rack, fumbling with them and laughing at himself. He had just wanted to teach Reki something in return, to pay him back, but he had never imagined teaching him something like *this*.

"Okay," said Reki, "let's ask them for a changing room!"

Langa probably should have paid attention, but he ended up getting lost in the way Reki's arms moved around while he talked to the store attendant, the pale tan line where his sleeve kept riding up. Langa was swallowing away the thought of touching that tan line when he heard the attendant say,

"You guys wanna share this room? It's the handicapped one so I'm sure you'll both fit."

Langa glanced up, his mouth going dry, just as Reki said,

“Sure! Okay! C’mon, Langa.”

“Wait,” Langa tried to say, weakly, but the sound was drowned out by the music overhead, and the attendant’s keys jingled open the door, and Langa realized that all the other changing rooms were full. They had come on the wrong day. The mall was too crowded, and Reki was tugging him inside the changing room, and closing the door behind them, and Langa had to struggle to breathe.

God. The changing room was so *small.*

Reki turned around, grinning, and started hanging up the clothes Langa was holding. The changing room was so cramped that they could barely move without bumping into each other, and even worse, three of the four walls were made up of big, glossy mirrors. Was Langa going to have to stand here and *watch* Reki pull off his clothes? Langa’s mouth was so dry he could barely swallow. They had gotten changed in Reki’s bedroom before, but only with their backs to each other, and Langa always had to chant *don’t turn around don’t turn around* to make sure he wouldn’t peek. It was just that Reki’s skin always looked so *warm,* and like it would feel soft to the touch, and Langa had caught glimpses of the firm muscles in Reki’s stomach when he laughed, and *god.* He was going to give himself away, Reki was going to—Reki was going to notice for sure.

The scene was playing in his mind before Langa could stop it—Reki frowning at him, his mouth twisting into something unpleasant. *Have you really been looking at me like that , Langa,* he would say, disapproving, and then, *Did you really think that I—did you really misunderstand* that *badly?*

Langa swallowed again, panicky fear rising in his throat, pressing his hands hard to his thighs. Reki was rifling through the clothes he had hung up, making that humming sound again, and the fear burned at Langa’s eyes, so hard he had to blink and blink and blink, because god, he didn’t want—he didn’t want to make Reki uncomfortable, what if he accidentally did something wrong—and Reki wouldn’t like him anymore, Reki wouldn’t want to press their shoulders together, Reki wouldn’t tumble around with him on the bed, laughing, Reki wouldn’t hug him or kiss him or let Langa breathe shakily against his mouth or—

“You should wear this one,” said Reki, pulling out a blue shirt with a wave across the front, “and this one! This one’ll look awesome on you.”

Langa blinked at the blinding yellow, trying to breathe. “I,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Reki, pressing the hangers into his hands. He was grinning, his expression easy and excited, but Langa couldn’t smile back, he couldn’t even move, his hands were stiff and frozen and he was afraid, and Reki must have noticed, because his forehead creased. “You—are you shy? I won’t look. I’ll close my eyes, I promise.”

Langa could barely choke out the words. “Really?”

“Of course!” said Reki, and he frowned a little. “Shit, I should have asked you first, right? About the changing room? We can take turns in here if you want, I can leave.”

Langa managed a swallow, some of the fear receding away from his eyes, so he could see again. “No,” he said, his voice shaking a little, but he fought hard to steady it. “It’s okay. You don’t have to… to leave.”

“Okay,” said Reki, and then he took Langa by the shoulders and shuffled them around, and Langa barely stifled a cry as he stumbled to the other side of the changing room, Reki’s hands firm on his upper arms. Langa’s chest burned, and then Reki turned him around, his hand pressing to the small of Langa’s back, and god, that burned too, and Langa could see his whole face flushed red in all three of the mirrors. “Here,” said Reki, a sort of determination in his voice as he shoved the shirts into Langa’s hands again. “You can face this way, and I’ll face the other way, so you know I’m not peeping on you in the mirrors, okay?”

“I—” said Langa, flustered, as Reki grabbed several shirts off the door. “Are you going to —”

“Don’t worry, man,” said Reki, and Langa could only stare at the mirrors in dismay as Reki began to tug off his shirt. Hastily Langa squeezed his eyes shut, but it was too late: the image was already branded into his mind, Reki’s hair getting stuck in his t-shirt, the pale expanse of his skin, the tan line at the bottom of his back. God. Fuck. Langa was never—he was never going to forget the way that looked.

He stood there, struggling to breathe, for what must have been a full minute before he tried squinting his eyes open again. Luckily Reki's skin was safely covered up again, this time by a burst of yellow and orange cloth. With fumbling fingers, Langa unbuttoned his own shirt, biting back a noise of frustration when he got stuck on the bottom two buttons. He was all sweaty again by the time he pulled on the blue wave shirt.

"Ready?" asked Reki, and for some reason Langa felt tight-chested and hot at the word, like he was supposed to look *good* for Reki, even though really he looked like a mess, his hair all over the place, the headband slipping over his forehead, the shirt hanging loosely to one side. But he balled up his hands and turned around, and Reki glanced over his shoulder before turning around, too.

The changing room was *so small.*

"Wow," said Reki, his eyes dropping to Langa's collar, and Langa swallowed hard, at the intensity on Reki's face. Reki reached up and straightened Langa's shirt, his knuckles rubbing against Langa's collarbones, and when Langa swallowed again, he could just *see* Reki watching his throat bob.

"It looks good," said Reki, and there was something funny in his voice, even when he took his hands away. His face looked warm. "I knew that'd be a good color on you."

Langa squeezed his hands tighter into fists, trying not to panic. Had Reki noticed how flushed he was? Had Reki figured out how much Langa wanted to stare at him shirtless, how badly Langa wanted to touch the muscles in his upper arms?

"I like—" Langa tried to say, but his voice gave out, and he had to clear his throat before he started speaking again. The room was just *so small,* god, and Reki was *so close.* "I like that one on you, too."

"Yeah?" Reki spread his arms and looked down, and Langa's chest tightened again, because the sleeves rode higher than Reki's sleeves normally did, and he could see the cluster of freckles on Reki's biceps. "It's comfortable. Okay! We can try again. I won't peek!"

Langa sort of wanted to die. “I know you won’t,” he mumbled, turning around, fumbling with the hem of the t-shirt. Of course Reki wouldn’t want to peek at him. What would he even want to see? There was nothing special about Langa, and he had never taken off his clothes in front of anybody before—he would probably be too nervous to even move if he did. Langa was just Langa, and Reki was gorgeous, he had the most perfect tan and firm arms and the dip of his spine, *god,* the dip of his spine.

Langa tried not to think about Reki being disappointed in him, somehow, as he quickly changed into the next shirt.

Reki made him turn around again when he had the shirt on, and then again, and again until Langa was dizzy with the myriad of colors clashing with Reki’s vibrant hair. He looked good in every single shirt, just like Langa had *known* he would, and all Langa could do was keep repeating, “It looks nice. It looks nice.” Reki grinned and punched his shoulder every time, and Langa’s face was warm from all the touching by the time Reki handed him the final shirt, a simple black tank top.

At least Langa thought it was a simple black tank top, until he reached to tug the hem down and the hem wouldn’t *budge.* “Reki,” he tried, and Reki hummed in affirmation. “I can’t—half of the shirt is missing.”

“Oh!” said Reki, and when he turned around, Langa jumped a little, arms coming up instinctively to try to pull the shirt down again, but it wouldn’t, god, it wouldn’t and half his torso was exposed, pale in the bright lights of the changing room. His face burned, and he could see Reki studying him in the mirrors—all three of the *goddamn* mirrors.

“It’s too small,” Langa managed, but Reki shook his head quickly, hair flopping around his face.

“It’s a crop top!” he said. “It’s supposed to be like that. My sister said crop tops are in style.”

“For—for *girls!”* Langa wanted to die all over again. “Is this a girls' shirt?”

All of a sudden Reki shifted, looking embarrassed. “I—I didn’t realize there were—girl shirts and boy shirts?” he said. “I just grabbed whatever I thought would look good on you.”

Langa hid his face in his hands. First the tiny changing room, he thought, his cheeks hot against his hands, and now *this,* Reki thinking he would look good in half a shirt. God. *God.* Langa was never going to make it out of this mall alive.

“Are you shy?” asked Reki, a little quieter now, but closer, and Langa jolted up again, gazing forward into the mirror—Reki was right behind him, still hesitating. “It looks good on you. Sorry, I didn’t think— I just thought, y’know, Langa has a good body, he probably wants to show it off sometimes.”

“I—” Langa had to clear his throat to get his voice above a squeak. “What?”

Reki rubbed his shoulder, and the noise of protest dried up in Langa’s mouth when he realized that Reki’s shirt was sleeveless, too, an oversized sort of tank that hung low around his body. “Y’know,” said Reki, still sounding embarrassed, and when Langa met his eyes in the mirror, his whole body went tight and breathless with the way Reki was looking at him. “Like, you’re so...I mean, you’re so tall and handsome and all that stuff. I just thought, I don’t know, you’d probably feel confident about it.”

Langa tried to breathe. Reki teased him for being stupid and handsome all the time, stuff like *man you’re lucky your face is pretty,* but never—never like this, never with this shifting, nervous sort of look on his face. And then Reki said,

“See, look,”

and moved forward, so Langa could feel his breath against his shoulder. Reki hesitated for only a moment before he rested his hands on Langa’s waist, below the hem of his shirt *against his bare skin* and Langa lost all his words, all his coherent thoughts.

“You look good,” Reki repeated, and Langa could only gape at him in the mirror, at the warmth of Reki’s body behind him, at the rough skin of Reki’s palms against his sides, against his bare skin. His body was wound up tightly, his breathing frayed and ragged and

god, he had never known his skin was so *sensitive* until he felt the scratch of Reki's band-aids against his sides. He had to clamp his mouth shut to stop himself from making some kind of humiliating noise as Reki tilted forward to rest his chin on Langa's shoulder, making a face at him in the mirror. "Man, do you not even realize?"

Langa tried to make words, but his throat wouldn't work, and Reki sighed against him, his hands squeezing Langa's waist just slightly, and Langa choked, his body flushing hot, because Reki was *holding him.* Reki was holding him and he was standing so close and Langa wanted to pull away but he also, god, he also wanted to push closer, against Reki's body, he wanted Reki's arms wrapped around him, pulling him tight against his chest, he wanted Reki to hold him.

Instead Reki squeezed again and let his hands fall, just as the wires in Langa's brain fizzed out entirely, breathless with the inches of distance between them. "You have no idea, do you," said Reki, shaking his head. "You have no idea."

"I—wh—what?"

"Nothing," Reki said, rubbing at his face, where his cheeks seemed redder than usual, and he looked away. "M'sorry I gave you a girls' shirt. You probably wouldn't want anybody to see you like that, huh?"

The laugh he gave sounded off, almost shamefaced, but Langa's brain was completely lost, still struggling to detach from the image of Reki's warm, sunburned arms caged around his waist, holding Langa against him. Reki had already turned around, and in the mirrors, Langa saw him fumbling to get the shirt over his head, and again he squeezed his eyes shut too late. God. Reki had this—this scar, maybe, or a birthmark between his shoulder blades, a white splotch against his spine, and god, now Langa wanted to touch that place, to see if it felt different than the skin around it, and god, what if he kissed it?

Stop, he tried to tell himself, scrambling to get the shirt off before Reki turned around again, *stop stop stop stop stop.*

(His brain would not stop.)

When Langa was finally safe in his own shirt, Reki asked, “Which ones did you like?” and Langa turned around to see Reki holding hangers in each hand, raising them up. Langa swallowed, trying to remember his favorites. The problem was that they had *all* been his favorites—Reki made every color look brilliant, like the sun, and the shirts hugged his skin like they were made for him. Langa wanted to bury his face in each of them.

“I think,” he said, wracking his brain desperately. “I think, um—the one with palm trees.”

Reki paused, glancing down at the hangers, and then looked up at him again. “I meant, which ones of *yours* did you like?” he said. “Not the ones I tried on.”

Langa gulped, his face flushing anew. “Oh,” he said. God, he was an idiot, of course Reki had been asking which ones he wanted to buy for himself. “I, uh. That one.” He pointed at random to a blue shirt, and Reki nodded, almost to himself.

“That was a good color,” he said. “Okay. I’ll get the one with the palm trees, since you liked it so much.”

God.

Reki looked up at him again, but his grin was hesitant, like maybe Langa had done something wrong, something that made Reki feel uncomfortable, and hastily Langa tried to smile back. “Yeah,” he managed. “I...I liked it.”

“Okay!” said Reki, some of the pep back in his voice, even though he still seemed a little off as he held open the dressing room door for Langa. Langa followed him out into the crowded, noisy store again, hoping desperately he hadn’t messed up, somehow, or misunderstood something. They crammed between the racks of clothes to get into line, and Langa hung onto the back of Reki’s t-shirt when a group of girls tried to squeeze between them. It was so loud in the store, and Reki’s shirt was warm and sort of damp in his fingers and Langa clung to him, tightly.

And then, in a rush of sound, he heard someone say his name.

Langa froze. The line for the cash register was crowded, but could hear girls' voices somewhere around them, and he managed a glance over his shoulder, panic pounding in his fingertips. The group of girls huddled together by the swimsuits—were they the same girls from the mixer? Langa couldn't remember, and his own fear began to build in his eyes again, because he couldn't recognize their faces, but they were standing close enough that he could hear one of them say, "...so weird seeing them together."

"I know," said another one, and then her words were drowned by the noise, and Langa only caught, "...why Langa hangs out with him?"

Langa's eyes blurred, panic fierce in his mind, and when the moment eased he could see that the girls had turned away, walking toward the changing rooms. He could feel that his own hands were clenched, his heart pounding against his ribs, the ground unsteady under his feet, and god why wouldn't those girls leave them alone? Why couldn't Langa just have *one day* with Reki, when they were happy and safe and and and then he glanced at Reki, and his heart stopped, his chest squeezing tight around his lungs.

Reki's head was down, staring at the hangers in each of his fists. He had heard.

Langa didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to say, or what to do, and everything whirled around him, a blur of colors and sounds and panic, and he clenched his hands tighter, trying to breathe, trying to keep himself upright. So many people were speaking at once, the cashier calling out to them, the sounds rising louder and louder and louder, and suddenly Langa felt afraid, like he was going to fall over, and he reached for Reki's shoulder, and

and Reki brushed him away, turning ever so slightly to the side.

Langa stood there, his legs wobbling, his vision crumbling around him. For a moment he couldn't see anything at all, only panic, and then even when he blinked and blinked and blinked, the world wouldn't come into focus, everything was so blurry and Langa's eyes stung and his throat was so tight he couldn't breathe. Reki had brushed him away. Reki had brushed him away. Reki hadn't wanted Langa to touch him, Langa had just wanted to lean against him and catch his breath and Reki hadn't wanted him to, and for a terrifying second Langa thought he was going to cry, right here in the crowded store.

But then the cashier called, “Next!” a distant, disembodied sound, and Reki was moving again, bringing the shirts up to the counter. Langa’s legs moved, too, somehow, carrying him toward Reki, hovering behind him. Reki swiped his credit card before Langa could think to stop him. Reki pushed one of the shopping bags into Langa’s hand. Reki turned to walk out of the store without stopping to let Langa latch onto the back of his t-shirt.

Somehow Langa managed to get through the crowd of people and colors anyway. Then they were out in the open lobby of the mall, under the lofted white ceiling, and Reki heaved a sigh, fumbling with his wallet.

“Can we get food?” he said. “I know you’re hungry, right? You’re always hungry.”

He wasn’t looking at Langa.

“Yes,” Langa said, faintly, because he was hungry, or at least he was empty, he felt empty, his body felt numb and shaky all at the same time. Reki wasn’t looking at him. Why had he brushed Langa away? Why wouldn’t he let Langa comfort him? Langa could, Langa could comfort him so well, he could hold Reki’s body tightly and protect him from anybody, he could tell Reki that whatever those girls said wasn’t true.

But then he shivered a little, thinking of the spinning panic, the way his throat closed up.

Maybe he *couldn’t* comfort Reki. He always shut down when things went wrong, he never knew the right things to say, and his chest deflated, limp and empty. Maybe this was why Reki had brushed him away. Langa wasn’t good enough. Langa was clumsy, Langa was mute and broken, Langa was—

“C’mon,” Reki said. “It’s this way. I remember from the map.”

He began walking again, without waiting for Langa, so Langa could only see the back of his head and he forgot, for a moment, how to move. Then his feet stumbled, trying to keep up with Reki, who was walking so fast, and Langa’s body was numb, but it also hurt, and he couldn’t stop thinking of what those girls had said, *why does Langa hang out with him,* and of the horrible heart-dropping moment when Reki had brushed him aside.

He fumbled with his credit card at the fast-food joint and he fumbled to poke his straw into his drink and he could barely understand the cashier's accent and it was so loud. It was so loud in the mall, and Langa lost Reki for a moment, in the crowd, and his throat filled up, his feet numb like concrete against the ground, his body wobbling. "Reki," he tried to say, and then the blur of Reki's red hair came around a woman's stroller, holding a soda.

"C'mon," said Reki, and this time he took Langa's arm and led him over to a tiny booth by a potted plant and Langa nearly cried. Reki's hand was warm. Maybe he had forgiven Langa.

(Langa didn't know what he had done wrong—what had he done wrong?)

"Are you okay?" Langa managed to ask, when their knees were pressed together under the booth. Reki stabbed his straw aggressively into his soda, and Langa startled, pressing against the seat of the booth, and Reki glanced up.

"Sorry," he said, and then sighed. "Sorry, man, it's not—it's not your fault."

"O—oh."

Reki sighed again. "You really don't see it, do you?" he said, and the way he looked at Langa was sort of sad, like a kicked puppy. "You're, like, you're out of my league, man. Like, people don't even understand why we're *friends* 'cause you're so much cooler than me."

Langa's mouth was dry, his mind spinning. "What?"

"Yeah," said Reki, stirring his straw around. "I mean, you must know how cool you are, right? Like, you're the best skater I've ever met, and you're really handsome, and you never talk too much, like ever."

Langa struggled for words. "I—I never have anything to say."

It wasn't exactly true—sometimes he had too much to say, but the words got themselves locked in his brain, and Langa got locked inside his brain, trapped, no matter how much he wanted to talk.

"You could say more," Reki said, quietly, his legs pressing against Langa's under the table. "People...people would like to listen to you. You have a nice voice, and you're always polite, and I think everybody is a little addicted to your accent."

Something prickled in Langa's brain, like fear maybe. "I don't have an accent," he said.

Reki laughed a little, poking his hand. "C'mon, man."

"I—I have an accent?"

Reki looked at him, like he was trying to figure out if Langa was joking, but Langa's throat was going tight with panic, because god, oh god. Did he talk funny? Did people think something was wrong with him? Oh god, was something wrong with him?

Reki pushed his soda aside, putting his hand on top of Langa's. "Dude, it's okay," he said. "People like it, like, it's—I don't know. It's sort of attractive? I mean, that's what people say." He cleared his throat, his cheeks red. "You don't need to worry about that, okay?"

"I am worried," Langa choked out.

Reki squeezed his hand. "I know, dude. I know. It's okay. But there's nothing wrong with the way you talk, okay?"

Langa could only stare at him, his mind whirling *oh god you can never talk again, oh god do you mispronounce words, oh god oh god oh god.* Suddenly he was afraid he was sweating, god he was sweating, and he tried to pull his hand away, but Reki held on tightly.

“I didn’t mean to freak you out, man,” Reki said. “Like I said, you’re cool. You’re the coolest. You’re so cool that you’re probably gonna outgrow me and ascend to inhuman levels of coolness.”

Langa pressed his knuckles hard into the table, biting his tongue. Reki sounded sort of resigned when he said that, as if he thought Langa really *would* outgrow him, and Langa’s throat was tight with fear. If Reki stopped being his friend, then Langa would be alone again, untouchable, encased in his own fear, like a snowsuit so thick no one could reach him. “I don’t want that,” he managed.

“Okay,” said Reki. “Okay, I know, I’m sorry. What do you want?”

Langa struggled. “For us to be friends,” he said, finally, in a small voice.

Reki sighed, a little, and Langa’s throat burned, but then Reki squeezed his hand. “We are friends,” Reki said. “I promise! We’re the bestest of friends, and we’re gonna stay friends as long as you want, okay?”

Langa didn’t want that, he wanted Reki to want to, and he wanted more, god, he wanted so much more and the flush made his hands sweaty and hot. But he just nodded, trying to blink hard enough to bring their clasped hands back into focus. After a moment, Reki patted his hand and released him, offering Langa his fries. Langa managed to take one, even though his hands were still sort of shaking.

“You know,” said Reki, quietly, settling back against the booth. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

Langa choked on the fry, his throat closing up. “Do what?”

Reki shifted, glancing away, not looking at Langa. “You know,” he said. “The date? I mean, what if someone sees us? I feel like it would ruin your—your reputation, or whatever.”

Langa's eyes began to burn again, Reki's red hair blurring. He tried to blink, he tried to swallow, but the words were all lodged in his throat: *no, no, please Reki, please god please.* He had wanted—he had wanted that date *so badly.* He hadn't realized until now how badly he wanted it, Reki's warm sweaty hand clasped tightly in his own, taking silly pictures with their faces squished together, giggling together as if they were really—as if they were really together. Langa wanted to cry, his body so empty and aching on the stupid booth seat. He had just wanted to *pretend.* It would be so easy, with Reki's arm around his waist, his lips against the corner of Langa's mouth, it would be so easy to pretend for the day that it was real, and as long as he could have just *one day* then it would be enough. It would be enough. Langa would treasure the photos forever, and the memories, and it would be enough.

And now Reki didn't want to.

Langa bit the insides of his cheek, so he wouldn't beg. How could Reki do this? How could he promise Langa everything he wanted and then steal the promise away a heartbeat later?

"I," he said, and his voice wobbled. God. God, he was going to cry. "I don't care about my," his throat worked over the word, *reputation,* and god, his *accent,* "I don't care about my reputation." *Please,* he wanted to say, *please, can we please still go? Please, I'll do anything you want.*

Reki shifted. "Are you sure, dude? You heard what they said, you're…" He muttered the rest of the words, poking at his food, and Langa barely made out, "too good for me."

Langa pressed his hands hard against the edge of the table. "I want to go," he said, and even though the words burned his throat, he still managed to get them out. "Can we still go?"

Reki glanced up at him. There was something weird on his face, and Langa's heart throbbed against his chest, because god, he was going to say no. Langa had messed up somehow and now Reki was going to say no, he wouldn't take Langa on the date, even though Langa had already dreamed about it so many times. He clamped his mouth tightly closed so that he wouldn't cry, but Reki just looked back down at his food.

"We can go," Reki said, his face flushed. "If you want to."

“Do—” Langa’s voice shook— “Do you want to?”

Reki’s shoulders sort of slumped. “Yeah,” he said, and then he mumbled something else, under his breath, something Langa didn’t catch, but it didn’t matter, because the numbness in his limbs finally relaxed in relief. Reki’s feet found his under the table, and they pressed together, the sides of their sneakers touching, and Reki put his elbows on the table while he stuck a fry in his mouth, and Langa nearly cried when Reki gave him a clumsy half-smile. Langa’s mom would never allow him to put his elbows on the table, but he would never, ever tell Reki that, because he wanted Reki to be comfortable around him, god, that was all he wanted.

“Don’t worry about it, okay?” Reki said. “You’re gonna do the date perfectly, I already know. You’d be the perfect boyfriend, right, Langa? God, you’re such a gentleman.”

Langa’s heart throbbed. God. He *wanted* to be the perfect boyfriend, but he was too clumsy and awkward and Reki wouldn’t want him anyway. “Um,” he managed, “maybe.”

Reki sighed again, a little, shaking his head, and even though he grinned at Langa as he did it, Langa’s chest still felt sort of shaky. He felt like there was something he didn’t understand, something Reki understood intrinsically that he didn’t. Did people really think Reki wasn’t good enough for Langa? How did they decide something like that? Did Reki believe it, too?

Langa’s heart hurt, even when Reki squeezed both sides of his left sneaker between his feet. All he wanted was for them to be good enough for each other. Why was that so much to ask for?

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> trigger warnings for this chapter include bullying and discussion of Reki's unsupportive father. for bullying: their classmates laugh at Reki's nail polish (pause at “Are there any questions for Reki?” and ctrl+f to "The bell rang. Everyone scrambled up"). for Reki's dad: Reki talks about how his dad used to laugh at him and his sisters, and that he told Reki no girls would ever want to date him (pause at "you're a good brother" and ctrl+f to "finally Reki found the tiny orange bottle of nail polish" and then pause again at "can I tell you about something?" and ctrl+f tp "Langa, man, I love you."
>
> stay safe friends!!

Langa fell asleep on the train ride home. His brain was exhausted from all the stimulation, and the quiet rumbling of the train lulled him into a deep, jumbled dream. He held both of Reki’s hands in the dream, stuttering out a confession and lifting his face in fear. But Reki only tilted his head and said, *I don’t understand,* the sunset in muted colors around his face, and Langa realized he had said everything in English.

The dream came crumbling down around him, his heart falling and falling and falling, and Langa shifted, mumbling incoherently to himself. Distantly he could feel a warm weight on his head, and when the world blurred real again, he could feel Reki’s hand carding through his hair.

All of a sudden Langa’s body was wide awake, alight with nerves. Reki’s fingers smoothed the wispy hairs away from Langa’s face, petting his head, slow and careful. His hand was so warm, and everything smelled like him, and when Langa blinked his eyes open, he could see down the loose collar of Reki’s shirt, at his collarbones. Jesus, he—he was *leaning* against Reki, their arms pressed close and warm, his cheek smushed against Reki’s shoulder. Langa blinked again, staring at the way Reki’s skin bled from sunburn red to a pale brown beneath the collar of his shirt. Jesus. *Jesus.*

“You awake?” Reki mumbled, his voice soft, rumbling along with the sounds of the train. He ran his hand through Langa’s hair again, and Langa buried his mouth against the warm sleeve of Reki’s shirt to stifle the sound he made. Reki’s fingers felt so good against his scalp, his fingers scratching lightly at the skin above Langa’s ears. “S’almost our stop,” Reki said, and

then he mumbled a word Langa didn't recognize. Langa closed his eyes, because the word sounded like a term of endearment, and for five heartbeats Langa allowed himself to believe it had been.

Then Reki ruffled his hair and took his hand away, and Langa squeezed his eyes tightly shut, feeling colder without the weight of Reki's palm against him. Slowly he sat up, trying to smother his yawn in his sleeve, and Reki chuckled, elbowing him.

"Shouldn't've stayed up late having dirty dreams," Reki said, and Langa's already-warm body flushed warmer.

"Stop," he said, but there was no bite to it, and the way Reki hummed in response was thick with affection, their arms still jostling together every time the train swayed underneath them. Langa pressed his hands beneath his knees, gazing down at the shopping bags at their feet, his head aching with the pressure of being awake, of remembering everything that had happened at the mall.

Before they left Canada, Langa had ridden in the backseat of his mom's car twice a week to see somebody about his panic. But they had never remembered to find him a new doctor in Okinawa.

"Gotta stay awake a little longer," Reki said, his voice still low, practically in Langa's ear, and Langa suppressed a shudder. "S is tonight! We gotta go cheer for Joe."

"Joe?"

"And Shadow," said Reki. "You wanna make bets on who's gonna win? I'll let you choose first."

Reki was so kind, Langa thought, as they quietly discussed the different possible outcomes of the race. Reki's fingers twitched constantly against his thigh, and even though his fingernail polish was chipped, his hands were so gentle. Langa wanted to hold his hand, but he forced himself to keep his hands in his own lap. Nobody should tell Reki he wasn't good enough for Langa. Reki was the best thing in Langa's life, the only thing that made Langa feel even

vaguely *human.* Without Reki, Langa would be lost in a crowd, blinded, his eyes like snow goggles that obscured everything. He would never hear the social nuances that Reki was so in tune with, the whispers from their classmates that Reki couldn't block out.

As the train rumbled through a low canopy of trees, Langa leaned against Reki, closing his eyes again. He shouldn't; he was touching too much, he was taking advantage, but he was so tired, too tired to care.

"You good?" asked Reki, quietly, touching Langa's knee, and Langa suppressed another shudder. He could feel the hair on Reki's legs when their calves brushed together. It made his whole body feel tingly.

"Mm."

"What'd you think about the mall?" asked Reki. "I thought it was okay. But they needed more skateboarding stores."

"Mm." Langa wanted to bury his face in Reki's shoulder again. He needed to recharge; it had been such a long day, and he'd been so overwhelmed. All he wanted was to lie in a dark, quiet room with Reki and hold his hand for hours and hours. "It was good. It was really loud though."

"Yeah?" Reki turned his head, the setting sun filtering through the trees, lighting up his face. "Was that—was that a problem?"

Langa didn't want to admit it was a problem. He didn't want to be a problem for anybody, a burden, but sometimes he got so worn out that it was hard not to be a problem, at least for a little while. Maybe Reki would be okay with it, since it was Langa.

"S'kinda overwhelming," he mumbled.

Reki sat up a little, his fingers splaying over Langa's knee, and Langa's body slid further against him, his head tilting to lean against Reki's. "I didn't know," said Reki, a sort of quiet alarm in his voice. "Langa, you should've told me!"

"I'm telling you now."

"Aw, Langa," said Reki, and he wrapped his arm around Langa's body, pulling him closer. Langa breathed out, long and slow, when his head settled back against Reki's shoulder.

It felt good. He was safe, now, and it was quiet.

"I didn't know," said Reki again, softer. "I'm sorry, man. We don't have to go back. Man, you should tell me this stuff! I wanna know, okay? I wanna know if you need anything."

"Mm," mumbled Langa, burrowing deeper. Reki's voice was low and thick with concern, and the words sank deep into Langa's bones, quiet but so, so caring. He knew Reki meant it; he knew Reki *wanted* to mean it, the same way Langa ached to be able to comfort him, too. Sometimes Reki talked too fast and interrupted too much and got theatrically upset without explaining what was wrong, but Langa could still feel the warmth of Reki's palm, heavy on his arm, the edges of his band-aids a little rough. Reki was trying. He wasn't perfect but he was trying and maybe it would be okay if Langa wasn't perfect, either.

"Okay," Reki said, softly, squeezing his arm. "Go back to sleep, okay, Langa? I'll wake you up when we get there," but his words were lost in a jumble of warmth and sleep and in his dreams, Langa imagined that Reki leaned in and kissed the top of his head, a tiny precious gift.

They had to split up at Langa's apartment, because Reki needed to go babysit, but he bumped Langa's fist and promised to come back over before S. Langa's keys sounded loud in the quiet apartment complex, and when he opened the door and called, "Mom?" he could already tell that she wasn't home.

Carefully he set his bags by the foot of his bed, planning to lay facedown and will himself into oblivion until Reki knocked on his window, but then he noticed it: a corner of black fabric peeking out of one of the bags. Langa frowned, kneeling down, moving the other clothes out of the way.

It was the black half-a-shirt. Langa's heart pounded once, *oh god we accidentally stole it,* but then he spotted the receipt in the bottom of the bag, and when he smoothed it out, he could read in clear type: *black satin crop-top.*

Langa's chest felt very warm. Had Reki bought this on purpose? Did he really think it had looked good on Langa? Langa didn't think he would ever have the courage to walk around wearing something like this, but the fabric was so soft, and Reki had liked it. Langa stood up on stiff legs, holding the shirt against himself, gazing into his faded reflection in the mirror.

Reki had said—something about Langa being confident in his body, something about Langa being handsome. He said that a lot. *God, you're so handsome, god, it's so unfair, god, look at yourself, Langa!* Langa didn't really think about his body at all, only when it got injured somehow, or when his limbs refused to work, or when he was panicking and he ended up trapped inside, blank-faced and silent. He squinted at the mirror, trying to see what Reki saw. All he could see was his awkward, gangly, pale self, with too many band-aids stuck to his too-long legs, his hair still messy around the headband Reki had tied on him.

Did Reki really think he was handsome? Langa's heart pounded once, slowly, but then he remembered that Reki was probably just repeating what he heard other people say—what he heard girls say. Langa sighed, letting the shirt fall onto the floor, among all his other clothes. Reki would never look at him that way, noticing and cataloguing away all the marks and scars on Langa's skin, fascinated with the way the bones in his hands moved. All of a sudden Langa felt tired, so tired, and when he lay down on the bed, he barely remembered falling asleep again.

On Friday, Langa had to give a presentation in their history class, and he stuttered through the entire thing.

He couldn't stop thinking about his *accent,* and every time he started a sentence, he was terrified of mispronouncing a word, and his ears thundered so loudly he could barely hear himself speaking. Two of the girls sitting in the front row whispered to each other and giggled, and Langa's body burned, hot and sweaty and oh god when would it be *over,* and then when it was finally over, the teacher stopped him and asked if there were any questions.

Langa gazed at the blur of his classmates and willed none of them to have questions.

One of the whispering girls raised her hand. He stared at her, wordless, and she said, "Langa?"

"Yes?"

She smiled at him, and Langa tried not to rub his hands against his pants, and then she laughed a little. "I forgot my question," she said. Her friend hit her arm across the aisle, and she swatted back. "Stop!" she whispered loudly. "He was distracting me."

Langa wanted very badly to be allowed to sit down. The windows of the classroom were open and it was so *hot,* and half the class was sleeping, and from his seat in the back, Langa could make out Reki pulling a sympathetic face.

"If there are no other questions…" said their teacher, and finally Langa was able to escape back to his seat.

Reki held out his fist across the aisle, and Langa remembered to bump his knuckles against Reki's, and Reki grinned and gave him a thumbs-up. Langa rubbed his sweaty hands against his pockets. At least Reki was shit at presentations, too, he thought, to comfort himself. It wasn't a very nice thing to think, but it made him feel better, and he knew Reki wouldn't admit it was true, too.

After everyone else had gone, the teacher finally called, "Reki?" and Reki scrambled to the front of the room for his own presentation.

His slideshow was out of order, as usual, and he accidentally said “Shit!” when he fumbled with some historian’s name, and Langa’s stomach twisted in sympathy. He rubbed at the condensation on his water bottle. Even when Reki was a mess, Langa still felt stuffed full of feelings for him, the kind of feelings nobody could take away, no matter how much his classmates giggled behind their hands.

“Reki, where are your references?” asked their teacher when Reki’s slideshow ended abruptly, halfway through his final argument.

“Ah!” said Reki, rubbing his elbow. “I knew I forgot something. Sorry, sir.”

Langa winced to himself—they had checked over each other’s presentations last night, and he had completely forgotten to remind Reki about the reference slide. Reki had been so excited to show him what he was doing with the new tools he had bought. Langa couldn’t wait to be finished with school, so they could spend their entire days just skating together and soaking in each other’s presence, but right now their teacher was shaking his head in disappointment.

“Are there any questions for Reki?”

The same girl in the front row raised her hand, and Langa slid down in his seat, wishing the bell would ring. Reki pointed to the girl, and she tucked her hair behind her ear and leaned forward, pausing for a moment before asking,

“Are you wearing nail polish?”

The class hushed. Langa’s spine prickled, no longer drowsy, and then a couple of people snickered, the sound rushing in Langa’s ears. Reki balled up his hands, his face flushing red, and said, “No.”

“Settle down, class,” said the teacher. “Are there any questions about Reki’s *presentation?”*

The same girl raised her hand, and her friend swatted her again, and Langa's heart pressed tight against his lungs, suffocating. All he could see was the uncomfortable flush on Reki's face, the tightness in Reki's shoulders as he pressed his hands to his sides. The teacher frowned at the girls and said,

"Okay, Reki, sit down. Don't forget your references next time."

"Yes, sir," said Reki. He ducked his head as he squeezed back down the aisle, his hands still balled up, and Langa wanted to grab onto him, but he could only watch helplessly as Reki slumped into his seat. The class shifted a little, uneasy, and Langa's hands twitched to reach across the aisle and latch onto Reki's wrist.

He tried to stifle the anger, but he couldn't. How could these people laugh at Reki's hands, his beautiful hands? Langa had loved Reki's hands since he didn't know when. They were so strong and they could do so many things, they could build anything, and they could hold Langa when he couldn't breathe until slowly he began to be able to breathe again. These people didn't know anything about Reki. They didn't have any right to laugh at him. They *shouldn't.*

The bell rang. Everyone scrambled up, gathering bookbags and cell phones, but Langa stayed in his seat, anger simmering low in his body. He turned, his knees bumping against Reki's seat, and he meant to say, *are you okay* or *they're awful I hate them all every single one of them,* but instead what came out was, "I'm sorry I forgot your references."

Reki rubbed hard at his mouth, his fingers still curled into his palms. "S'okay," he said. "We suck at school."

"Yeah," Langa said.

"We're terrible."

"We are."

“We’re the worst.”

“Yeah,” said Langa, “we are. I think I’m going to fail literature.”

Reki laughed a little, the sound muffled by his sleeve. “It’s ‘cause you take everything too literally,” he said. “You never understand when there’s a metaphor.”

“I don’t even know what a metaphor is,” Langa said, thinking of the last time he had tried to read a novel in Japanese, sprawled across Reki’s floor with Reki’s socked feet tucked under his legs. Reki had crawled over to peer at the page when Langa didn’t understand a word, but then he had started doodling in the margins, and they had ended up playing hangman on the worn pages instead of reading. Maybe the explanation for metaphors had been inside that novel, but more likely it was one of those things nobody ever explained, something Langa was just supposed to *understand.*

Finally Reki twisted around in his seat, kicking his legs against Langa’s. Langa could see the Pokemon band-aid on his ankle where his pants rode up, and his chest ached. Reki was so bright and vibrant in so many ways, and Langa felt sick when he thought of people trying to squash that out of him.

“Did I mispronounce anything?” he couldn’t help asking.

“What, in your presentation?” Reki patted Langa’s arm across the aisle. “Of course not, dude. Well, actually, you might’ve said Higashionna Kanjun’s name wrong? But I think I did too, so it’s okay. I’m sure nobody noticed.”

Langa wasn’t so sure about that, but he just said, “Alright,” and when Reki scrambled to his feet, Langa stood up, too, his legs a little stiff, his hands still sweaty.

“You wanna go to the skate park?” asked Reki, and Langa nodded. Reki uncurled his hands to grab his board as they headed out of the classroom, jogging down the school steps, the sun baking warm on their shoulders. Reki balanced on his board as Langa knelt down to tie his shoes, which somehow always came undone during class, and he was about to stand up when he heard someone yell across the courtyard,

“Headed to the beauty salon, boys?”

and after a beat of shock, Langa realized the guy was shouting at *them.*

He glanced up quickly, his mind whirling, in time to see Reki flip the guy off with both hands, leaning hard on one end of his board. Against the bright, hot sun, Reki’s hair looked like it was on fire, the sound of laughter rushing in Langa’s ears again, and he stood up unsteadily.

“C’mon,” Reki said, and he grabbed Langa’s elbow, his hand hot against Langa’s skin. One of the boys shouted something else, something Langa couldn’t make out, but as soon as Langa clambered onto his board, Reki pulled him fast through the courtyard, their skateboards picking up speed. They raced through the school gates, the world blurring around them, and Langa could feel the speed surging in his chest, in his fingertips.

He couldn’t really think. They were going so fast, and his ears were so full of sound.

Reki’s hair whipped around his face as they sped around the street corners, all the way to the skate park, past the benches and the smokers and the rails. His board skidded up one of the half-pipes, spinning in the air, and in his head, Langa cried out, because for a moment he was sure Reki would crash — the angle was all wrong and — and Reki landed hard on the board and rolled back to Langa, his chest heaving.

“Let’s skate,” he said, and after a beat, Langa nodded.

And they skated.

Langa’s whole body burned with the speed, with the heat of the sun beating down, the way his breath tore at his lungs, his ankles jarring on jump after jump. Reki was a blur of color around him, racing up ramps, flying through the air, his hand slapping against Langa’s palm every time they hurtled past each other, so hard that Langa’s skin stung. He could feel Reki’s energy like static in the air, the agitation radiating off him, and with their legs burning on the

skateboards, they didn't need words, they didn't even need thoughts, they only needed sun and air and the hot, hot asphalt.

Finally Langa collapsed on top of one of the half-pipes, staring blearily up at the bright, bright sky, his limbs screaming from exhaustion. He loved to skate, he thought distantly, he loved it because it required no words no thought no explanation. When Langa stood on the board, it was like his brain and his body finally *understood.*

Reki kept tearing around the skate park for at least twenty more minutes, as the sun began to sink toward the tops of the trees, and Langa closed his eyes, trying not to think. Those people —they were terrible to Reki. No wonder Reki had such awful self-worth. These people had broken down every tiny part of him until he couldn't even smile without wondering if something was wrong with the way his face moved.

Langa squeezed his eyes more tightly closed, but the sun burned through his eyelids, and he felt the half-pipe shudder as Reki scrambled up the sides, his sneakers squeaking on the rubber. Then he felt the warm, heavy slump of Reki's body, leaning with his back against Langa's propped-up knees. "That was good," Reki rasped out, breathless. "That was really good."

Langa squinted his eyes open. Reki had his face tilted up to the sky, his eyes closed, his eyelashes stubby and red against his flushed cheeks. His back was sweaty; Langa could feel it through the thin fabric of his damp undershirt, and his chest felt warm at the way Reki leaned so easily against him, unworried, so comfortable with the press of their bodies together.

Clumsily Langa sat up, leaning heavily on his wrists, keeping his knees propped up so Reki wouldn't move away. "Are you okay?" Langa asked, and his voice sounded scratchy, too. He tried not to wince, remembering about his accent again.

"Yeah," said Reki, and he opened his eyes, too, peeking at Langa. His eyes were so brown, Langa thought, and his heart gave a single, painful throb, even though he had seen Reki's eyes a million times before. The thing was, he had never seen them in *this* light, the way the color shone golden in the sun.

Langa struggled for words, his short fingernails scrabbling at the top of the half-pipe. Skating helped them burn off frustration, but Reki wasn't okay, he must be hurt, by what happened at

school. Langa was hurt, too. He knew they should talk about it, but the only thing he managed to say was,

"Can you... can you paint my nails, too?"

Reki frowned, the little crease forming between his eyebrows. "Aw, you don't want that."

Langa pressed his fingertips hard against the ground. He had always bitten down his nails until they hurt, although only in the quiet of his own room, where no one would see. His hands had never been beautiful, the way Reki's were, but maybe they could be a little beautiful.

"Please?"

"Langa," Reki said, looking at him, his expression like *c'mon, man,* and Langa's chest hurt, because why wouldn't Reki share this with him? They shared everything else, their bentos at lunch, Reki's bed, their shifts at DopeSketch, the skate park, even kisses. Langa wanted to share this, too. He wanted to share everything with Reki.

"I want to," he said. "Why can't I?"

"I—you *can,"* said Reki, glancing away, rubbing at his shoulder. "I just don't know why you'd want to."

"Why wouldn't I?"

Reki made a face, kicking his feet out, so his heels bounced against the curved side of the half-pipe. His cheeks were so red in the orange of the setting sun. "I don't know," he said. "You're so—I don't know! Like, clean-cut, or whatever. You always look good. You don't wanna do girly stuff like this."

“It’s not girly.”

“ *Langa.* ”

“Well…” Langa hesitated, glancing down at Reki’s sneakers. The shoelaces were mismatched, clashing colors, and Langa’s chest throbbed again. “Well, maybe people think it is. But I want to do it anyway.”

Reki squinted at him out of the corners of his eyes. “You didn’t wanna wear the girl shirt.”

“Not because—” Langa’s body was so, so warm, and he scraped his nails along the ground, making fists. “Not because it was a girls’ shirt. I was just. I was just embarrassed.”

Reki gazed at him for a long moment. Langa felt so hot under the weight of his gaze that he dropped his eyes to Reki’s freckled legs, the scrapes on both his knees, the soft hair shining in the light. He had pressed that Pokemon band-aid to Reki’s ankle himself the other day, barely able to resist kissing Reki’s knee as he did it, and then Reki gave a small sigh and Langa looked up.

“Well, okay,” said Reki. “I have the stuff in my backpack. But you know they’re gonna laugh at you.”

“I don’t care,” Langa said, the words tumbling out, because it was true, he didn’t care. He could barely even remember their names or their faces, they didn’t matter to him, the only people who mattered were Reki and his mom and maybe Miya and Shadow, too. “I would rather—I would rather they laugh at both of us. I want us to be—” *together*— “the same.”

Reki pressed his mouth closed, looking at Langa’s shoulder, where his hair was curling, sweat-damp. When Reki raised his eyes back up to Langa’s face, there was something fierce in his expression, something so strong that Langa shivered, even in the heat. “You’re a good friend, Langa,” Reki said, and his voice shook a little, tight and intense. “The best. You know that, right?”

“I…” Langa’s throat was so dry, and when Reki shifted against him, his shirt stuck to Langa’s knees, clinging there. Langa swallowed, uncurling his fists so his fingers were splayed along the ground. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Reki. He turned to face him, holding onto Langa’s knee for balance while he crossed his legs and yanked his backpack toward himself. “Tsukihi made me start carrying around the nail polish bottle because I kept chewing it all off in class,” he said, rooting around in the pockets. “And she said it made me look like a delinquent to have it all chipped and stuff. So I learned how to fix it in the bathroom at school, y’know, gotta keep her happy.”

“Yeah,” said Langa, watching his hands pull out random stuff from his backpack, scraps of paper and colored pencils he hadn’t even known Reki owned. Of course Reki would carry around nail polish and cram himself into bathroom stalls to fix his sister’s work. “You’re a —” the words stuck in his throat— “a good brother.”

Reki made a face, kicking his foot against Langa’s ankle. “I’m just—” he said, scrunching up his nose. “My dad thought this stuff was useless, y’know? The art and all that. Anytime Tsukihi would be watching those makeup videos on YouTube, he would laugh at her, like, he would make fun of us for wasting our time. I had to hide all my drawings. God!” He suddenly sounded angry, shoving his hands into the front pocket of his backpack. “I hated him.”

Langa’s throat went tight. He had a sudden image of younger Reki, with his chubby cheeks and eager high-pitched voice, the Reki from skating videos and home DVDs, happy little Reki being laughed at by his own father. Langa’s palms burned when he pressed them hard against the top of the half-pipe.

“I hate him, too,” he said, and Reki gave a half-laugh, but Langa meant it, with every fiber of his being. He had never really hated anybody before, he had never had reason to, but if a grown man ever showed up on Reki’s doorstep to *laugh* at him, Langa would kick him and beat him until he was a pathetic ball on the driveway. He was sure that he could do that, at least. He could never find the words to defend Reki against the people at school, he was too afraid, but he knew the fear would burn right out of his body if he had the chance to punch Reki’s dad in the face.

Finally Reki found the tiny orange bottle of nail polish and shoved his backpack aside with his feet, his legs stretched out alongside Langa's, facing him. "Okay," said Reki, "gimme your hand. Whichever one you want."

Langa picked up one hand and then hesitated, picking up the other one instead. He was suddenly thinking about Reki holding his hands, handling them gently, and his skin prickled, all over. "My palms are really sweaty," he blurted.

Reki laughed again, a low, raspy sound. "S'okay, dude," he said. "So are mine. See, we're the same."

He grinned a little when he said that, pressing his shin against Langa's hip, and Langa felt even warmer, and even sweatier. He held out his hand, trying not to wince at the bits of gravel he could feel clinging to the skin. Reki took it carefully between his palms, turning it over so he could rub his finger across Langa's nails.

"Sorry," Langa blurted out, suddenly ashamed of the bitten-down nubs of his nails. "It's, um. It's a nervous habit."

"Dude," said Reki, squeezing his hand, and Langa's heart went tight in his chest, "don't worry about that. I told you, I have to fix my nails all the time because I'm always biting on them."

Langa nodded, trying to swallow, but he couldn't, because his throat was so full. Reki was always doing this. Trying to make Langa feel comfortable, even if he sometimes got things wrong, or misunderstood Langa's internal panic as just another awkward silence. Reki was so good at making him feel comfortable, him, *Langa,* who had never really felt comfortable anywhere before, not even in his own skin.

He tried to swallow again. Maybe Reki always noticed his insecurities because of how often he lay awake, feeling insecure about himself. Thinking about that made Langa want to cry, but it also made him want to kiss Reki, their mouths raw and fervent against each other, so maybe Reki could feel for a moment just a *fraction* of everything Langa felt for him.

But he had to bite those things back, because Reki was uncapping the nail polish now, shaking the brush out onto the top of the half-pipe, tiny flecks of orange flying everywhere. “I don’t wanna get too much on your fingers at once,” Reki explained, and then poked his tongue into his cheek, frowning down at Langa’s hand. “Man, my hands are super freakin’ shaky, I’m probably gonna mess up. You’re gonna have to clean it up when you go home.”

“It’s okay,” said Langa. He didn’t mind, because it was okay, somehow, Reki being shaky and jittery since Langa was so numb and stiff. He straightened out his bony fingers, and Reki placed the brush carefully against the first nail, swiping the color on.

The nail polish was cold; Langa hadn’t expected that. It sort of tickled, the way Reki was holding his fingers, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration, but Langa treasured the feeling anyway. The pads of Reki’s fingers were rough, his palms littered with cuts and scrapes, but he was so gentle with the way he held Langa’s hand, like Langa was precious. Langa wanted to hold his hand forever.

“You’re good at this,” he said, watching Reki carefully paint the nails, his unsteady hands making impossibly perfect lines. “I should have known, since you’re so good at art.”

Reki made an incoherent sort of noise, flushing and squeezing Langa’s palm. “Don’t—!” he said. “Don’t just say stuff like that.”

“But it’s true,” said Langa, watching his face. It was so fascinating to watch Reki while he worked, just like it was fascinating to listen to him talk. He made so many expressions. Langa could barely remember to make expressions even at the best of times, he had always been like that—even as a baby he hadn’t cried very much—but all of Reki’s thoughts played out on his face like a movie. Langa wanted to watch him all of the time.

“S’embarrassing,” Reki mumbled, turning Langa’s hand over so he could paint his thumb nail, the band-aid on his palm scratching against Langa’s skin.

“No it isn’t,” said Langa.

“Yeah-huh!” Reki poked his tongue out, biting it in concentration, or maybe in embarrassment, and Langa’s heart pressed warm against his ribs, sweat rolling down his back. God. Reki didn’t know—he didn’t know what he was *doing,* his hands holding Langa so carefully, his *mouth* so bruised and red, his upper lip damp with sweat. Langa was going to break apart in his hands if he kept this up. He was going to *want* to.

“It’s not embarrassing,” Langa said, even though he could barely remember what they’d been talking about. “You just get embarrassed anytime anybody compliments you.”

“That’s ‘cause it’s embarrassing!” Reki rubbed his thumb over the back of Langa’s hand, placing it carefully onto the ground to dry, and picked up the other one. Langa’s heart skipped a beat at the press of Reki’s fingers against his pulse point. “How’m I supposed to react? Like —what am I supposed to do with my face?”

“You could say, ‘thank you,’” Langa said, his heart thundering in his chest as he watched Reki’s flushed face, the way his Adam’s apple bobbed on a swallow. Reki was *cute* when he was embarrassed. How had he never realized? The flush felt like it was sinking into Langa’s own skin, the sun burning over the tops of the trees. “You could say, ‘thank you, Langa.’”

Reki made a face, so red that his cheeks looked warm to the touch. God. God, Langa *ached* to touch him. “No way I’m saying that,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Cause!” Reki ducked his head furiously over Langa’s nails. “It’s embarrassing!”

“You think everything is embarrassing.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t have been embarrassed if I tried on the crop top!”

Langa choked on his own tongue, almost a laugh, his cheeks burning with the thought of Reki struggling to get his arms through the sleeves of the crop top. God, now he was never

going to forget that image. “You should’ve, then.”

Reki grumbled to himself, pressing his thumb hard into the top of Langa’s hand, and Langa gave another breathless laugh, his face still burning. Reki was so close that he could see the tag of his headband poking out of the edge, he could see the reddish freckles on the tops of Reki’s cheeks, he could feel the warmth of Reki’s uneven breaths on the back of his hand.

“Don’t piss me off,” Reki warned, pressing the brush to Langa’s pinky fingernail. “I have the power to make you look like a complete idiot right now.”

“How?”

“Don’t tempt—”

“How?”

“Stop!” Reki stuck the brush back into the nail polish, nearly spilling it, and then swiped it across Langa’s thigh, and Langa jolted, biting back an embarrassing noise. “There, now you have to live like that.”

“It’ll wash right off,” said Langa, trying not to betray how fast his heart was beating, how heavy his breathing was, his eyes fixed on the tingling skin of his thigh. The nail polish clung to the skin there, bright and wet.

“Maybe,” said Reki darkly, and Langa surprised himself by laughing again, even though his heart was still thundering against his chest. After a moment Reki grinned, too, his cheeks rounding out, and he finished painting Langa’s thumbnail, holding up his hand to admire it.

“Let me see,” said Langa, but Reki said,

“Hang on,” and pursed his lips, blowing against the nails, and Langa shuddered in surprise, heat rushing all the way to his fingertips. Oh, god. Why had that felt good?

“Why did you—”

“They need to dry,” Reki said, placing the hand carefully on Langa’s thigh, and Langa gazed down at the perfect little spots of color on his chewed-up nails. Reki’s hand hesitated there for just a moment, warm against the skin, and Langa wanted to stay that way forever, their hands together against the hem of his shorts.

“How long do we have to wait?” he asked.

“Maybe twenty minutes?” Reki turned slightly so he could kick his legs over the edge of the half-pipe, and Langa ached a little from the loss 0f contact, so he did the same thing, and Reki let their dangling feet bump against each other. “Don’t smudge them.”

“I won’t,” said Langa, staring at them. “I guess I can’t skate while they’re wet.”

“Nah, you’re stuck with me.”

The words struck Langa—did Reki really feel that way?—but Reki kicked the side of his sneaker before he could think of how to respond.

“Hey,” said Reki, “can I tell you about something?”

Langa could tell from the tone of his voice that it wasn’t necessarily a good something, but he nodded anyway. “Of course.” He wanted Reki to share things with him, and it felt good when Reki could trust him, like Langa was a good friend, the best.

Reki leaned forward over the edge of the edge of the half-pipe, his hair fluttering in the wind, his face tilted up toward the sky. Langa glanced at his hands, the chipped nail polish against

the chipped paint of the half-pipe, and then back up at his profile.

"It's about my dad," said Reki, making a face, his hair aglow in the dying sun. "Ugh, I never talk to anybody about this, y'know? It sounds like I'm whining. And it's kinda embarrassing, like, I'm such a freak that even my own dad didn't want me."

Langa's chest tightened with a quick, hot pain. "No," he said.

"Yeah," said Reki, and he gave this short little laugh, and Langa's chest tightened even more. "S'okay. I'm okay now. But he used to say this thing when I was in middle school, like, right before he left. He would catch me doing something like the drawings or the nail polish or whatever, or one time I tried wearing eyeliner like my friend Kiko. Anyway, whenever he caught me doing something he didn't like, he would laugh and say stuff like, *oh, Reki, you look so stupid, none of the girls at school like you, do they,* and stuff like that. Like, he would tell me I would never find a girlfriend 'cause of—'cause of the way I am. I don't know. I guess maybe he was right, but I hate that."

Langa stared at him, at the halo of light around Reki's head, at the rueful sort of smile around Reki's mouth. He felt as though he was falling, the world crumbling down around them, his heart sinking and sinking and sinking.

It wasn't just the people at school who made Reki feel worthless. It had been his father, too.

Langa didn't think his throat would ever work again, but he managed to say, "I'm sorry," and then, "He wasn't—he wasn't right, about you."

"Yeah, he was," said Reki, "kinda. But it's okay."

It wasn't okay. Langa could hear it in his voice, in the way he swung his feet, silhouetted against the sunset. Langa's bones hurt, and he pressed his palms against his thighs, trying not to ruin Reki's careful painting. Reki felt like he wasn't good enough. Of course he felt that way, because his dad had broken down his spirit, in horrible, mocking laughter, in terrible that had burrowed to deep in Reki's heart that he still carried them around, even now.

Langa tried to swallow. He had never wanted Reki to find a girlfriend before, he had dreaded it since the day they met, but now a new part of him ached inside. Maybe if Reki had a girlfriend, this awful, terrible thing would get a little better. Maybe Reki needed a girlfriend, just so he could believe he was good enough for one.

Langa felt like his heart was slowly splitting in two. This pain, somehow, was too deep for tears.

“You shouldn’t listen to him,” he said, but he could hear the way his voice trembled, the awkward, accented words. “He was just being an asshole. He was probably just—he was probably just jealous. Because I bet you’re better than him at every single thing in the world, and I bet that made him so mad.”

Reki glanced at him, the hint of a smile around the corners of his mouth. “Did you say he was *jealous* ?”

“Yes,” Langa insisted.

“Langa, man, I love you, but that’s not how it was.”

The sun burned in Langa’s vision. *I love you.* Reki had never said those words before, never so plainly. Langa wanted to believe them with his whole being. He wanted so badly for those words to be true.

“Well, he *should* have been jealous,” he said, the words coming out before he could think them over, “because you’re good at everything, remember? You’re so good at everything. You have such a great imagination, you can imagine anything, you painted my board for me, and you tell—you tell good stories, like when you’re putting your sisters to bed. I like hearing the stories whenever I stay over. Even though they’re for little kids.”

Reki glanced at him. Langa’s heart stuttered in his chest, but he kept going.

“And you’re—you’re going to find—someone who likes those things. I mean. I mean there’s a girl somewhere out there who will see how amazing you are at so many things and she’s going to...she’s going to love you. And probably nobody loves your asshole dad. So he should be jealous.”

Reki tilted his head, a bit pink in the cheeks, his face softer than before. “Yeah,” he said. “Maybe.”

His foot pressed to the side of Langa’s again. Langa’s chest ached so much he could barely breathe. He loved those things about Reki, and he wanted to say so, but Reki didn’t want Langa to love him. He wanted a girl.

“And you’re good at—” Langa’s heart stumbled again. “I mean, you’ve gotten better at—at the kissing and stuff. I mean when you get a girlfriend she’s probably going to be starstruck. I mean it.”

Reki laughed again, sort of choked up, pressing his sleeve to his mouth. “That’s embarrassing,” he said, muffled. “Starstruck?”

“Yes,” said Langa, and suddenly his palms burned with how much he wanted Reki to believe it. He leaned forward, and Reki’s eyes slid to his mouth, his eyelashes hooded, and Langa blurted, “Let me—let me show you, how much better you are, I—I think you improved a lot.”

Reki made an embarrassed sort of face, his cheeks scrunching up. “Really?”

Langa nodded, a bit desperate, and Reki breathed out and said,

“Okay,”

and Langa reached for his face but Reki caught his wrists in his fingers, holding him still for a moment, and Langa's heart tripped in his chest, his lungs burning.

"Don't smudge them," Reki said, softly, and lowered Langa's hands to his lap, still holding onto his wrists, and Langa swallowed and nodded. When he leaned forward again, Reki's eyes fluttered closed, and Langa could see his eyelashes sticking to the tops of his red cheeks for the sliver of a moment before he closed his eyes, too, and they were kissing.

Reki's mouth was hesitant the way it had been the very first day. Langa kissed against him softly, pulling away slightly to breathe, to make sure Reki was still okay. He wanted to touch Reki's face, to smooth his thumb along the line of Reki's jaw, but Reki was still holding his wrists loosely, so instead Langa kissed the corner of his lips, and then the faded dent on his cheek where Reki's dimple was when he smiled, and Reki made this small noise against him.

"Langa," he whispered, and Langa kissed his mouth again, so he could feel Reki's lips move when he mumbled, "M'not even doing anything, how'm I even improving?"

"You don't have to do anything," Langa mumbled back, kissing him again and then again, their mouths fumbling together without their hands to guide them. There was something building in his chest at the feeling of only their lips touching, without their hands in each other's hair or their tongues in each other's mouths, it was only him and Reki kissing again and again, soft, sweet kisses like they really loved each other.

Langa loved him so much.

And, god, anyone who got to kiss him like this would be starstruck. The feeling of Reki's breathing, the small noises he made in his throat, the softness of the hair on his upper lip, the warmth of his skin, it all made Langa feel like his heart was breaking apart and mending together again, over and over. Reki's hands tightened around his wrists, his mouth pressing against Langa's bottom lip, and god, this was probably how Reki would kiss somebody after a long, beautiful day together, this was probably how he would kiss somebody awake after a deep, deep sleep, this was probably how he would kiss some lovely, faceless girl on his wedding day, after a whispered promise to give all of himself to her.

When Reki kissed his cheek, Langa felt like he was going to melt, a puddle of emotions and affection and yearning on the top of the half-pipe, because he loved Reki *so much* and he

never wanted to give this up.

“S’nice of you,” Reki mumbled, sitting back, the sky purple and orange all around them. “To teach me. You don’t have to do this.”

Langa had never really taught him anything, but he still said, “I don’t—I don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” said Reki, breathing out a laugh, “‘Cause you’re too nice for your own good. God, I mean, did I ever even say thank you? Thank you, Langa.”

Langa’s heart pressed against his bones, the emotion swelling up in his throat. “You’re welcome,” he managed.

“See,” Reki said, rubbing his thumb over Langa’s wrist, “you’re too nice. I know I’m kind of a crappy friend sometimes. I should’ve checked on you before I dragged you to the mall and told you about your accent.”

Langa flushed, his breathing catching at the way Reki’s fingernail scratched lightly over the knuckles of his left hand. “It’s okay,” he said, but Reki shook his head a little, his hair falling into his face.

“I wanted to ask you about that,” he said. “You know how I planned this date for us, right? But it might be loud there. So if you wanna go somewhere else, we can do that instead, I don’t care. But I wanted to ask.”

Langa hesitated, his face still flushed from the kiss, warm. Reki was so kind, thinking of him like that. Nobody had ever done that for him before, except for his own mother, who hovered anxiously over him every time they had to go to the airport.

“Where were you planning on going?” Langa asked.

“There’s this carnival,” Reki said, releasing Langa’s hand to scratch at his own arm. “It’s on this pier, by the beach. So we would have to take a whole day to go out there, and maybe stay the night, if your mom would let us. I was gonna ask her in secret and then surprise you, ‘cause I don’t know if you had the beach in Canada, but there will probably be a lot of people there. And it might be overwhelming. So if you want, we can choose something else.”

Langa gazed at Reki, at all the colors around him, his heart pounding against his ribs again, more slowly than before. He wanted to go, suddenly, very badly. They could see so many things together. They could ride the train all morning and watch the world go by, they could lather on sunscreen on the sandy sidewalk, they could play carnival games and Langa could win Reki a stuffed animal, maybe, something he would like. They could take pictures with cotton candy, they could kiss on the Ferris wheel, they could hand hands sticky with sugar, and god, he wanted to.

“We should go,” Langa said. “I think—I think it will be fun. I want to see the water.”

“Yeah?” Reki squinted at him. “Are you just going along with it to make me happy?”

Langa shook his head. “I want to go.”

“Okay,” said Reki, squeezing his wrist and then letting him go, rubbing his hands against his shorts. “D’you wanna ask your mom this weekend? If she says no, maybe we can bribe her with a sob story or something. I’ll come back tomorrow with a sling on my arm and pretend I only have six months to live.”

“Don’t—”

“Sorry!” said Reki, hastily, and the panic that had jumped in Langa’s chest settled just a little. Reki put his hand on Langa’s upper arm and squeezed. “I’m so freaking sorry, god, sorry. We won’t do that. What d’you think she’ll say? No, probably, right?”

Langa tried to picture what his mom would say. A year and a half ago, when Langa had come to ask her if he could go on a trip with his best friend, she had said yes, but things had been

different then. Langa had been different then. But she liked Reki a lot, and she knew how much Langa cared about him, even though Langa was always too embarrassed to say.

Maybe Langa could force out a sob story if she tried to refuse, something about the people yelling across the courtyard at them at school, something about the chipped nail polish on Reki's nails and the lingering memories of his dad.

"I don't know," Langa said, truthfully. "But I hope she says yes."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> a VERY brief tw for Langa's dead dad (skip the paragraph beginning "'I'm not going anywhere,' Reki repeated.") thank u for reading!

On Saturday, Langa hurried into DopeSketch, out of breath and five minutes late, to find a girl laughing at the counter with Reki.

He pulled up short, trying to catch his breath, bracing his hand on one of the displays while the bell jingled over his head. The girl was wearing a short flowery t-shirt and jeans, and when she tilted her head back, laughing at the ceiling, Langa realized it was Yua.

God.

She was—she was pretty, wasn't she? Langa's stomach gave an unpleasant squirm.

"Langa!" Reki waved, grinning, his dimples flashing across the store, and Langa lifted his hand in return, breathing hard. Yua turned, smiling at him, and against the bright yellow of the counter, they looked so happy and colorful, and below the hem of Yua's crop top Langa could see the soft curve of her waist, her perfect stomach. His throat was burning from his run. She had been laughing with Reki. She had been *laughing* with *Reki.*

"Hi, Langa-kun," Yua said, and cleared her throat, still fighting a smile. "Ah, Reki was just showing me a video of you."

"Yua!" Reki screeched, and she laughed, one hand over her mouth.

"You *were,"* she said.

“Don’t tell on me!”

Langa opened his mouth and then closed it, his stomach shriveling up, all squeamish and cold. Reki had been showing her *skating* videos? Of *him* ? He had thought those videos were only for them. He had thought Reki saved those videos to watch by himself in the middle of the night, when he couldn’t sleep, when they had to be apart from each other, when he felt that clammy-palm feeling of being separated.

Langa should have known. Of course he was the only one who felt that way.

He swallowed, rubbing his hands against his pants, and Reki must’ve seen the awkwardness in his posture, because he said quickly, “It was a good video! Anyway, that wasn’t what we were laughing at. We were laughing about the part at the end when I flub the same jump, hang on, lemme rewind—”

Langa walked slowly up to the counter, trying not to look at Yua, who had the softest face, the sunniest smile. She was so gentle, and there was nothing gentle about Langa. He was too tall and he fumbled every time he touched Reki, he fumbled every time he *talked* to Reki, he was clumsy and stiff and his hands were always always cold and sweaty and he tried to swallow.

Reki leaned across the counter, all up in Langa’s space, smelling like dust and the DopeSketch back room, showing him the video. Langa stared at the screen, even though he had seen the video before.

He shouldn’t be so—so jealous. Reki was just hanging out with a friend. Reki was allowed to laugh with other people, but Langa still felt sick and afraid inside, unable to swallow enough. If Reki found somebody else to laugh with, wouldn’t he leave Langa behind? Wouldn’t he stop squeezing Langa’s arm every time he saw him? Wouldn’t Langa stop being allowed to sleep over, and oh, god, he couldn’t—he couldn’t give that up, he slept so good in Reki’s bed, burrowed in Reki’s blankets with Reki’s socked feet warm between his legs, he slept so much better there than anywhere else. Langa held tight to the counter as the video ended.

“I bet you have good videos of yourself, too, Reki,” said Yua, shaking her head a little, smiling. “You’re just too embarrassed to show them to me. Right, Langa-kun?”

“Um.” Langa’s throat was so dry. Reki laughed a little, embarrassed, and god, he was so close to Langa, leaning across the counter, his warm arm nearly pressed to Langa’s. He smelled so good. He smelled like summertime and DopeSketch and he looked so good in the pink uniform, the same pink in his cheeks, and Langa swallowed hard. “Yes,” he said. “Reki’s very talented.”

“Aw, cut it out,” said Reki, shoving at his shoulder, grinning. “Langa here is the master. I’m just some nobody who follows him around.”

“Oh, stop,” said Yua, and she gave Langa a small smile, maybe a bit rueful, and said, “You two are so cute together. Ah, I should probably let you work, shouldn’t I? I’m always intruding.”

“No,” said Langa weakly, because *he* was the one intruding, the one who had stumbled into their little bubble of laughter. God, they had probably been flirting, hadn’t they? Their hands brushing on the phone while they shared it between them, their eyes meeting, secret smiles playing around their mouths, and god, Reki would probably be so pretty when he was flirting. Langa tried to swallow again, but there was a pit opening up in his stomach, because Reki would never look at *him* that way, warm and mischievous, Reki would never flirt with *him.* God, what would he even say? There was nothing romantic about Langa.

“I’ll see you guys at school,” said Yua, and then she turned to Reki and added shyly, “I, ah. I like your nails, also. I didn’t get a chance to tell you.”

Langa balled up his own hands as Reki choked out a laugh, rubbing at his face. “Oh, uh—thanks!” he said, and then she waved at them with her tiny hands, her flowery shirt ruffling as she hurried out of the store, the bell jingling behind her.

Then it was quiet, and Langa didn’t know what to say. He looked back at Reki’s phone.

“Sorry about that,” Reki said, sounding embarrassed, still fumbling with his phone, closing the video. Of course he was embarrassed, a cute girl had just complimented him, and she *should* because Reki’s hands looked so *good* in this light, strong and suntanned like they would hold onto someone’s waist so *well* and Langa pressed himself hard against the counter. Reki had held onto *his* waist, when they were in that tiny changing room at the mall. All of a sudden he wanted to feel it again, badly. If Reki was holding him then he couldn’t run off and leave Langa all alone.

“I’m late,” Langa said, his voice a bit scratchy, when Reki glanced up at the clock. He already knew he was late, but it was the only thing he could think to say. Reki stood up, both hands on the counter.

“Ah, you’re fine!” he said. “Manager Oka’s not here to catch you. Hey, I’m gonna stay for your shift, okay? Except I have to leave a little early. But then I’ll come back for you, and we can head to your place, okay?”

Langa nodded, even though his throat was still very very dry and the lump wouldn’t go away, no matter how many times he swallowed. Reki was supposed to come over for a sleepover tonight, and they were going to eat pizza and try to convince Langa’s mom to let them go to the pier. But maybe Reki wanted to see Yua first. Maybe he would change his mind about the date. Maybe he would want to take her to the pier instead, and he would take photos of them there and send them to Langa, while Langa waited on the couch at home alone, longing for him to come back, and…

“Langa, man,” said Reki, putting his hand on Langa’s shoulder, and Langa jumped. “You okay? You’re zoning out on me again.”

Langa blinked and blinked at the store, the afternoon light spilling through the dusty windows, the walls cluttered and colorful. “Yes,” he said, and Reki squeezed his arm.

“You sure?”

Langa swallowed and nodded, and Reki slid his hand down to Langa’s elbow, and Langa tried not to shiver, because Reki’s palm was warm and scratchy against his bare skin. Reki tugged at his arm.

“Can I see your nails?” he asked. “I wanna see how they look today.”

“Oh,” said Langa, still trying to clear his mind. Carefully he placed his hands on the counter, stretching out his fingers. The nail polish was chipped on his ring finger, and he felt a sudden spark of panic. “Wait,” he said, “I messed them up, I—”

“Relax, dude,” said Reki, leaning over, thumbing appreciatively at Langa’s nails, and Langa’s heart stuttered in his chest. “They look great. I can fix that one real fast. And then I’m gonna try to do my literature homework.”

Langa tried to breathe. Reki’s hand was warm against his. “Can you do mine, too?” he couldn’t help asking, and Reki laughed, patting his hand.

“You’re never gonna learn anything!” he said. “But yeah. I’ll just change up the answers a little, she’ll never notice.”

Langa was pretty sure their literature teacher had already noticed several times before, but he nodded anyway, grateful. He wanted to ask why Yua had come by, if she was buying something or if she had just dropped in to see Reki, to laugh with him. Were they friends? Langa only had fractured memories of them hanging out in the halls between classes, among the blurry memories of all of Reki’s other friends. If only he could remember faces better. If only, if only…

Reki’s phone lit up between them, and before he could snatch it away, Langa caught sight of a new reminder:

Make sure Langa isn’t overwhelmed (he gets that way if it’s too loud!)

“Ah!” said Reki, his face red, scrambling backwards with the phone clutched in his hands. “That was just! Just nothing! Okay. I’m gonna go clock out! I’ll clock you in, don’t—don’t come back here.”

Langa nodded, rubbing his hands against his pants again as Reki clambered into the backroom, knocking over an empty box. His face was warm. Reki had made a new reminder about him. He had thought about Langa's panic, enough to write it down in his phone—he wanted to make sure Langa was okay. Maybe he wouldn't leave Langa alone, after all. Reki was too kind for that, too good a friend. He would always have Langa's back, he would always be around to do Langa's homework, to hang out at DopeSketch during Langa's shifts. Maybe Langa could learn to live that way, with only fragments of Reki, snatches of time before his dinner dates with girls.

He still wanted all of Reki. But even a little of him was enough to make Langa feel warm and sweaty and a bit out of breath.

Reki disappeared for the last ten minutes of Langa's shift, and Langa stayed behind the counter with his chin pillowed in his arms, anguishing. Reki wasn't coming back, he thought, Reki must have met a beautiful girl on the sidewalk, Reki had asked somebody out, Reki had been approached by a modelling agency who had finally noticed how cute the gap between his teeth was when he smiled, and they were going to fly him far, far away, where he would meet so many beautiful girls, and—

The bell jingled, and Langa lifted his head. And there was Reki, silhouetted in the light, holding a huge bouquet of flowers.

Langa sat up straight, his heart thudding against his chest. Why—why did Reki have flowers? Was he planning a confession? Had Yua really made him laugh so much that he was going to, he was going to—Langa choked on his words.

"What—what are those for?"

Reki looked at the flowers and then back at him.

“For your mom!” he said.

Langa choked again. His pulse slowed, but only marginally. “Why?”

Reki frowned, letting the door swing shut behind him. “Isn’t that what you do?” he asked, sounding confused. “Like, you dress up all nice and stuff, and bring a gift, you know, when you’re going to somebody’s parents to ask permission to—”

Langa waved his hands hurriedly, cutting him off. “Where did you hear that?”

“I thought that was what people did,” Reki said, faltering a little, then making a face. “Like, in Canada? I thought you had to ask permission to date somebody. She’ll like them, right? Moms love flowers.”

Langa tried to breathe, his heart in his throat. Of course his mom would love them. She loved Reki so much, she would exclaim over the flowers and probably try to hug him way too many times. But did Reki have to make it sound so much like a—like a marriage proposal? Langa’s poor heart wasn’t going to be able to take it.

“Well,” he managed. “Well, okay.”

“C’mon!” said Reki. “Let’s hurry. The faster we get to your house the faster she’ll order the pizza.”

Langa grabbed the keys off the counter and hurried outside after him, locking up DopeSketch with shaky hands while Reki bounced from foot to foot.

“She’s gonna like them,” Reki said, like he was assuring Langa. “And then she’s gonna say yes! Dude, that’s the most important thing.”

“She’s gonna think you’re trying to steal me away to elope,” Langa said weakly, pulling out the keys.

Reki choked out an embarrassed yelp, shoving at Langa’s shoulder, but then he laughed, his hand sliding onto Langa’s upper arm. God. Langa swallowed. In the cool evening air Reki was *so* warm and he smelled so good, so good, and god, Langa just wanted to turn around and wrap his arms around Reki’s middle, bury his face in the soft fabric of Reki’s hoodie. He wanted a hug. Hastily he shoved the keys into his pocket.

“I’m not stealing you away,” Reki said, jostling their arms again as they climbed onto their boards. “Well, maybe I am! You’ll show up and there’ll be a priest and everything and by then it’ll be too late for you to run. I’m gonna be the ol’ ball and chain, man. Sorry to break it to you!”

Langa thought his face was going to burn off. “Stop,” he managed, as Reki kicked off, grabbing Langa’s wrist and dragging him with him, and Langa let himself be pulled, their boards picking up speed down the long, sloping sidewalk. His bouquet flapped in the wind, and several petals blew away, whirling in the air. One of them landed on Langa’s mouth, and he spluttered, and when Reki glanced over his shoulder, he started laughing again.

Langa’s face was so warm. He managed to rub the petal away, and then Reki leaned his body heavily to the side, swinging him around a curve in the sidewalk, and Langa’s heart thundered against his chest, because, god.

Reki’s hand, strong on his wrist, palm warm. Reki *laughing.* Reki laughing because of *Langa.*

Even skateboarding didn’t feel as reckless as *this.*

“You can’t tell her it’s a date,” Langa whispered, frantic, holding Reki back, away from the apartment door. The hallway was quiet, the fans whirring overhead, and Reki’s sweatshirt rumpled underneath his fingers.

“I won’t!” Reki whispered back, except whenever Reki whispered the sound always carried, and Langa clung to his arm more tightly, trying not to picture Reki asking his mother permission to take him on a date. He gulped, throat burning. Langa’s mom knew about Reki —she knew how much Langa liked him, even though Langa had never said it in so many words. His blush had given him away. And now his mom was about to give everything away to Reki.

God, this had been a terrible idea. Whose idea had this been?

“Langa?” came his mom’s voice from inside. “Is that you, baby?”

“Let go of me!” Reki hissed, and Langa tightened his grip for a moment before releasing him, because god, it would look even worse if he was clinging to Reki like a starfish, and he tried to rub his hands against his palms, but god, now he just looked *guilty.* His mom was gonna *know.* Of course she was gonna know, and she was going to spill the secret right here at Reki’s feet.

Langa opened the door with sweaty hands, and Reki bounded inside.

“Oh my god,” said his mother, as soon as Reki held out the bouquet of flowers, Langa cramming through the doorway behind him. “Oh my goodness, Langa! They’re so beautiful. Oh, baby. Did you tell Reki thank you?”

“They’re not for *me,* ” Langa managed, his face burning, god, his hands burning. He elbowed Reki. “Tell her!”

His mom gave him a questioning look. Of *course* she thought they were dating. God. Langa was an idiot, and his face was on fire. “Hasegawa-san,” began Reki, glancing sidelong at Langa. “Is it okay if I bring Langa on, um, a...a completely platonic day trip?”

Langa cringed.

“Oh!” said his mom, still looking at Langa, wide-eyed. “Oh, well. Of course, Reki, sweetie. Is there—is there a special occasion?”

“No,” said Reki, but he was very obviously lying, and the way he elbowed Langa didn’t help. Langa was pretty sure he was going to combust under the way his mom raised her eyebrows, because the apartment’s living room suddenly felt way, way too small, and way too warm.

“Okay,” said his mom, hesitantly. “Well...well, you boys know you can tell me anything, right?”

“There’s a carnival,” Langa said hastily, before Reki could say anything. God. God, his heart was pounding in his cheeks. “Reki wants to show me the carnival. Because it only comes once a year.”

His mom gazed at him. Langa bit back another excuse, his hand clutching unintentionally at the sleeve of Reki’s sweatshirt again, and, fuck, he knew that was a dead giveaway, but he couldn’t help himself. His mom raised her eyebrows again, a sort of concerned look around her mouth. She thought they were hiding something from her. She thought they were hiding a *relationship* from her, Jesus .

“Well,” she said again, slowly. “Alright.”

“And we wanted to stay the night there!” Reki jumped in. “If that’s okay! I have money saved up from work, I was gonna pay, Langa won’t have to pay for anything.”

He sounded proud of this, a hint of satisfaction in his voice, and Langa swallowed hard. Reki hadn’t told him *that.* God. This really *did* sound like a date, didn’t it?

“Stay the night...where?” His mom was frowning again, her eyebrows creasing. Langa thought he was going to pass out from the heat in his neck, on his cheeks.

“A hotel!” said Reki.

“A hotel,” she repeated.

“Yeah!” said Reki. “I have everything picked out. I can send you all the information. Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of him!”

Langa squeezed the sleeve in his hands. Reki pressed closer to him, and Langa’s throat burned, and his mother gave him this weighty, knowing look.

“Well, let me think about it,” she said. “Does your mother know, Reki?”

Reki nodded. “She said it was okay with her if it’s okay with you!”

His mom looked at them. “Langa,” she said, and Langa tried not to gulp. “Sweetie, can we have a little chat about this later? About, you know, safety.”

Jesus. Jesus, fuck. Langa’s voice was all croaky when he said, “ *Mom.* ”

“And please clean your room first,” she said, taking the flowers and placing them in the vase on the coffee table. “It looks as though you haven’t cleaned it since we moved in. Reki, will you please help him?”

“Okay,” said Reki, nudging Langa’s side again, and Langa tried not to make a horribly embarrassing noise at the way Reki’s elbow dug into his ribs. God. “That’s basically a yes!” Reki whispered in Langa’s ear, but the whisper was so loud in the room that Langa knew his mom had heard, and he rubbed his hands over his cheeks to try to scrub away the blush.

Reki tramped after him into his bedroom, and it was only after Langa turned on the lights and closed the door that he realized what a disaster the room was.

His clothes were strewn everywhere, and things were falling out of his closet, and his schoolbag lay abandoned on his bed, papers and books spilling out, and, fuck. Langa must've forgotten to clean again. He forgot a lot of the time. He was usually preoccupied thinking of other things, mainly Reki's smile, and Reki's knee bumping against his between their desks, and Reki kissing him, god, Reki kissing him with his hands on Langa's knees, leaning over him, his hair in Langa's mouth, his thumbs on Langa's jaw, his—

Reki snickered. Immediately Langa felt his face flush again.

"Stop," he muttered, kicking a pair of boxers quickly under the bed, because, *Jesus.* "Your room looks just as bad."

"That's not true," said Reki. "All my stuff has a place, I just have a lot of things."

"Well, all my stuff is…" Langa hesitated, glancing at the overflowing trash can by his bed, the crumpled up notebook pages falling out. God. He hoped none of those were the confession letters he sometimes drafted to Reki in the middle of the night. Hurriedly, he gathered up the trash can and began to shove the papers back into the bottom of it.

"I can help you clean," Reki offered, but Langa said,

"Just—just a minute, let me—"

God, he hoped he didn't have anything incriminating in here.

Reki shrugged, bouncing onto Langa's bed, knocking several textbooks to the floor. He took out of his phone and started reading Langa texts from his giant S groupchat—there was some new drama with Cherry and Joe that Langa didn't fully understand—and Langa tried to nod along as he quickly scoped out the corners of his room. Inside his desk drawer was every post-it note Reki had ever doodled on, and stuffed into the corner of his closet was the sweatshirt Reki had once lent him, but other than that, Langa was pretty sure he was safe.

“Okay,” he said. “Can you—can you help me fold clothes?”

Reki snickered again, but he said, “Of course, man,” and slid down off the bed onto the floor. They ended up buried under freshly washed clothes on the carpet in front of his closet, bundled in between his bed and his dresser, the warm yellow light of his lamp making Reki’s hands look soft and golden. It turned out that Reki was good at folding clothes. Of course he was. Reki was good at everything.

“I have to do my sister’s laundry all the time,” he explained, when he caught Langa staring at his hands, at the deft way he folded up the shirts. “They have so many clothes! Ugh. I’m like Cinderella over there.”

“My mom does my laundry,” Langa admitted, and Reki kicked him through the messy clothes, laughing a little.

“You big baby,” he said, but he sounded affectionate, and Langa tried not to shiver at the warm press of his foot against his ankle. Reki didn’t move away, and the bedroom suddenly seemed as small as the rest of the apartment, very very small and a bit stifling, but Langa didn’t want Reki to take his foot away. “If we lived together,” Reki said, “I’d probably have to do everything for you, huh? You probably don’t even know how to mop.”

“I know how to…” Langa trailed off, frowning a little, because he couldn’t remember ever mopping before, and Reki laughed again, poking his knee. Langa squirmed away, but not really, because his body was warm with the thought of living together with Reki, in a tiny apartment like this one. Would Reki really wash his clothes for him? Maybe he would wash them all together, one big jumble of clothes, and then Langa would smell like Reki all the time.

He rubbed his hands on his pants, fumbling for the next clean shirt. He couldn’t shake the daydream now. They could wake up together, Reki could cook breakfast in his pajamas while Langa unloaded the dishwasher, they could press their shoulders together in the kitchen while watching the coffee brew, Reki could kiss his cheek and smooth away his sleep-rumpled hair and…

“You’re thinking about that, huh?” Reki said, grinning softly, bumping his ankle. “Me doing all your chores for you?”

Langa tried not to choke on his own tongue. “No.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Reki, knowingly. “Sure.”

Langa was so warm, and his hands were so sweaty, and his armpits were sweaty, too, his t-shirt clinging to him. “I wasn’t,” he said, but he knew his voice gave him away, so he tried to clear his throat. Reki lifted up one of Langa’s oversized pajama shirts. “I was just thinking about…”

“About?”

“About,” and Langa’s throat was so dry, for no reason, god, he was so sweaty and clumsy. “About...about what we’re going to do after high school. After we graduate high school. What do you want to do?”

Reki tilted his head, and Langa tried to swallow, he tried not to give away that he had been thinking about him and Reki buying a tiny little house after graduation and living together forever and ever. “I dunno,” Reki said, kicking at Langa again, through the clothes, his foot warm. “I haven’t really thought about it. Maybe I’ll go to college, but it would need to be nearby. My mom needs the help with the girls. How about you?”

Langa shrugged, a little, looking down at where Reki’s toes pressed against his ankle. Reki was folding most of the clothes, he thought, but it wasn’t Langa’s fault, he was lost in the feeling of Reki touching him.

“I don’t know, either,” he said. “I want to…”

Reki hummed a little, waiting while Langa wrestled with his thoughts. He folded a pair of Langa’s sleep shorts, and Langa shifted a little, flushing with the idea of Reki’s hands

touching his clothes. “What?” asked Reki, when Langa was quiet for too long.

“I want to keep…”

“Yeah?”

“To keep skating together,” Langa blurted, and then he wanted to bury his face in his hands, because god, could he be any more embarrassing? Reki choked on a sort of laugh, and when Langa looked up, Reki looked sort of red in the face, too, rubbing at his mouth.

“Dude,” he mumbled, and Langa flushed, but then Reki dropped his hand, exhaling. “Of course we’re still gonna skate together, okay? Why do you keep saying this stuff? D’you think I’m just gonna abandon you or something?”

Something stuck in Langa’s chest. He couldn’t speak, and after a moment Reki’s eyes slid to him, and understanding passed over his face, his mouth parting slightly.

“Oh,” said Reki, and then he scrambled to put the clothes down, to put his warm hand on Langa’s arm. “Oh, dude, I’m sorry. I would never do that to you, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

“But what if,” Langa managed, and god, he couldn’t do this right now, he couldn’t let his throat swell up and these words tumble out, “what if you don’t... *mean* to and…”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Reki repeated, squeezing his arm, and Langa swallowed, managing a nod. They sat there for a long moment, and Reki’s thumb started rubbing these soothing little circles into the skin below Langa’s sleeve, and Langa felt like crying. Of course Reki didn’t know everything; he didn’t know the way Langa had lain awake in his parents’ bed for hours and hours, waiting for them to come home, but he did know that Langa’s dad had never *come* home, so maybe he understood, on some level, what Langa was feeling.

Finally Reki let his hand fall away, but he shifted closer, so their knees pressed together as he began to put Langa's clothes away in the dresser drawers. "Yua said her friends have been asking about you lately," he said, and Langa squirmed, watching the glimpses of Reki's pretty nail polish as he gathered up the clothes. "They all wanna know if you like any of them."

Langa made a discontented noise in his throat, and Reki laughed a little, elbowing him.

"Really?" Reki said, but there was a sort of catch in his voice, as he busied himself with fitting everything into the drawer, poking his tongue into his cheek. "No one?"

"No," said Langa, because he didn't like any of them, he only liked Reki, god, he didn't think he could ever like anybody the way he liked Reki. His mom would say that was only because he was a teenager, but Langa's chest swelled up so much when he watched the side of Reki's face, the way he wrinkled up his nose so the bandaid there crinkled. God. He felt so many feelings for Reki that sometimes he thought they would melt right through his pores.

"What about you?" he heard himself asking. "Do you like anyone?"

Reki poked his tongue into the corner of his mouth, and Langa's heart squeezed, because Reki's mouth was so flushed and pretty, and then he realized that Reki was blushing. His heart stuttered. Reki...Reki was blushing.

Reki liked someone?

Langa's stomach sank, and the urge to cry swelled up in his throat all over again. Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no, he thought, oh, no, please no, please, why? Why couldn't he just have this *one* thing? He liked Reki so much. He tried to swallow, but his throat was thick with fear, with how easily he could lose this, the safe feeling of Reki's knee pressing against his own.

Reki liked someone.

Someone who wasn't Langa, someone beautiful, maybe, not on the outside but on the inside, because Reki could make anybody pretty, just by standing near them, just by laughing with them, and surely he would be drawn to somebody just as wonderful, somebody like Yua, somebody with the brightest light in their eyes and Langa was just,

he was just,

some part of Langa had died along with his father and surely Reki could see that.

He tried to swallow again. "You like someone?"

Reki made a muffled, embarrassed noise, shoving clothes into the drawer. "No," he said.

"Really?"

Reki huffed again, his shoulders drawing up, his face flushing brighter. "Well, okay, maybe, a little! It doesn't matter! Why—why do you care?"

Langa could only stare at him, opening his mouth and then closing it again. His stomach was sinking so low, so heavy. How had he not noticed? Of course Reki liked someone. Why else would he suddenly become so interested in practicing all of these things? They had been friends for so long and Reki had never wanted to kiss Langa before. Reki had found someone else, of course he had found someone else, and Langa swallowed, suddenly afraid. How much time did he have left? Could he—could he ask something like that? He just wanted to know. Surely Reki could tell him that much, so that Langa could begin to brace his heart for the day Reki announced he was done with practicing, that he wanted the real thing.

"Who is it?" he managed, and the blush on Reki's face darkened, and he shoved his hands in his lap.

"Nobody," he grumbled. "It's not important!"

Langa's heart squeezed. Would Reki really not even *tell* him? Didn't he trust Langa? Or would he only allow Langa close enough to kiss him? "Is she in our class?"

Reki made a face at his lap. "She—is."

Langa cleared his throat, but his voice was dying away, and he wasn't sure Reki could hear him when he asked, "Are you going to...to confess?"

Reki rubbed at his face with both hands. "No," he said, muffled, and the fist squeezing Langa's chest loosened, just a little, because alright, alright, it wasn't immediate, Reki wasn't leaving yet.

"Why not?"

"Because!" Reki lifted his face, and god, his cheeks were so red that something hot swooped in Langa's stomach, and his own face flushed. God. God, now was *not* the time to be getting flustered over Reki being flustered. "Because I'm not—because this person is—they're out of my league! And I'm not romantic. I'm just—I'm just Reki, okay? And it'd be stupid for me to try to...to *confess*."

"I'm sure that's not true," Langa tried, but his voice was faint, and god, Reki needed reassurance, didn't he? He needed Langa to coax him into confessing to his crush, but even the thought made Langa feel like he was going to throw up. Reki's face was so bright and flushed and Langa's stomach was twisting, and he wanted to touch Reki, god, he wanted to know if Reki's skin felt warm when he was blushing like that, and god, what if *Langa* could make Reki blush? The hot squirm went all the way to his toes. What if he could kiss Reki good enough for that? To make Reki flushed and panting, his eyes screwed up, the color creeping all the way down to his chest, and…

"M'not gonna confess," Reki mumbled, and Langa's stomach twisted sharply again. Why was he thinking about this? Reki was saying he had a crush on *someone else.*

“Well,” managed Langa, and then he hesitated, because he knew he should reassure Reki, but instead he heard himself say, “Well, okay. You should wait until...until you’re ready.”

Maybe Reki would never be ready. Langa hoped not, god, he hoped not.

Reki muttered something unintelligible, and then pushed a bundle of clothes into Langa’s hands. “Hang these up in the closet,” he said, rubbing at his face again, tugging his headband lower on his face. “It’s really freakin’ hot in here.”

“Sorry,” Langa said, fumbling with the clothes, standing up on stiff, wobbly legs. His heart was thumping, slow and painful, against his ribcage. He should have known he was only a replacement for somebody else, a clumsy friend for Reki to practice with before he could get his training wheels off. He should have known. He couldn’t make Reki blush like that—when they kissed, Langa was the only one who got all panting and sweaty, and god, what if Reki had noticed, what if, what if…

Behind him, Reki made this choking sound, and Langa turned around in time to see Reki holding up the crop top.

Langa’s throat suddenly clogged up, his face burning. He had forgotten to hide the crop top. He tried to grab for it, but Reki toppled over backward, knocking his head into Langa’s mattress, trying to shove the crop top under a pile of clothes.

“You—” Langa felt like he was gonna die, his head lighthearted and his heart throbbing—“You left that in my bag!”

“I didn’t *mean* to!” Reki said, his voice high-pitched and mortified. “I just—!”

Langa grabbed again for the shirt, but Reki rolled over, trying to hide it under his body. “It’s mine,” Langa said, a sort of desperation itching in his chest, in his palms, as he managed to wrestle the shirt out from under Reki’s body (and, god, Reki’s skin *was* hot, he was burning up). “You gave it to me, so it’s mine.”

“I didn’t—!”

“You *did,”* said Langa, and he shoved the crop top in his top drawer, his face hot and flushed, trying to breathe. For some reason all he could think of was Yua in her pretty short shirt, the way her stomach had peeked out below. If that was what Reki liked—

“Ugh,” Reki groaned, burying his face in his arms, and Langa began shoving clothes at random into the closet, trying to cool down the burning in his cheeks. God. Okay. He could—he could do this. So maybe Reki knew that sometimes he thought about trying on the crop top again, just to see how it felt against his skin. It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter, because they were just friends, and so it didn’t matter if he looked stupid in front of Reki, it wasn’t like he was trying to win over Reki’s heart or anything, he couldn’t do that, he wasn’t stupid.

He managed to clean most of the room around Reki’s slumped body. Reki didn’t take his arms off his face.

Finally his mom knocked on the door, and after a long minute (a too long minute), she came inside. “The pizza is here, boys,” she said. “Do you want to eat in here? It’s okay as long as you use napkins.”

Langa nudged Reki’s limp body with his foot. Reki made a muffled noise into his arms. Across the room, his mom mouthed, *We need to talk,* and Langa tried not to wince. How was he supposed to convince his mother that Reki wasn’t stealing him away for a weekend so they could hook up? Reki would probably be horrified if he knew Langa’s mom thought things like that.

“We can eat in here,” Langa said, avoiding her eyes, and his mother made a concerned sort of humming noise, but she still brought them the pizza and the napkins. Finally Reki got up off the floor, the flush mostly drained out of his face, although his cheeks were still sort of blotchy. Maybe he had bought the crop top so he could wear it himself, Langa thought, and he was embarrassed that Langa had found out. The thought made a hot shiver go through Langa’s stomach, no matter how much he tried to squash it.

Together they sat cross-legged on the bed. There were three pizzas, and Reki folded together two pieces immediately and shoved them into his mouth. He said something with his mouth full, and Langa made a face, and Reki swallowed.

“I said, I gotta eat fast before it all disappears down the endless garbage disposal of your stomach.”

“Stop,” Langa said, kicking him across the bed, and Reki kicked him back, sticking out his tongue. His pizza drooped dangerously over his wrist. “Don’t get it all over my blankets!” Langa said quickly. “My mom will never let us eat in here again.”

“Oh, c’mon,” said Reki. “You already live in filth.” But he lifted the pizza above his head anyway and lowered it into his mouth instead of onto the comforter.

“It’s not filth,” said Langa, trying not to watch Reki’s throat bob as he swallowed, hastily busying himself with the pizza. At least they weren’t talking about Reki’s crush anymore. His stomach tightened painfully, but he managed to get two slices out of the pizza box and fold them together the way Reki had done. Maybe they never had to talk about that again. Maybe Langa could just stop thinking about it.

(He knew he would never stop thinking about it.)

They tore through the pizza boxes in fifteen minutes, and Langa let Reki have the last piece, even though he wanted it, because he had probably eaten more than his fair share, anyway. When Reki stretched, his sweatshirt rode up, and Langa looked away, his neck warm, and fumbled to put the pizza boxes on the ground.

They took turns in the bathroom, changing into pajamas and brushing their teeth, and Langa took a long time washing his face, trying to scrub away any signs of a blush from earlier. He could do this. It was just a sleepover. They had sleepovers all the time, and Langa had survived every time that Reki burrowed deep into his chest, he had survived every time that Reki mumbled his name in his sleep, his mouth clumsy against Langa’s sleeve. He pressed the cold washcloth to face and reminded that it didn’t mean anything, it didn’t mean anything, those things didn’t mean *anything* because Reki had someone else he’d rather be doing them with, and it wasn’t Langa.

Finally he left the bathroom. Reki was flopped on his back on Langa’s bed, wearing a fresh sweatshirt for bed, a soft soft gray one, and Langa swallowed. Reki reached out his hands,

making grabby motions.

“Come cuddle me.”

Langa swallowed again, heat rising in his face again, even though he had just held a cold washcloth to his cheeks for five minutes. Reki looked sort of embarrassed, too, a tinge of pink in his cheeks, but he was still grabbing at the air, trying to get Langa to come closer.

“Why?” asked Langa, walking closer, dropping his old clothes onto the floor, right where they had cleaned just an hour ago, and Reki made a frustrated sound in his throat.

“Because,” he said, something whiny in his voice, and Langa’s stomach squirmed. God. God, he *wanted* to cuddle Reki, he wanted to shove himself up against Reki’s soft sweatshirt and burrow in all of the blankets, and before he knew it, he was climbing onto the bed, rising up on his knees, hesitating. “C’mon,” said Reki, latching onto the hem of his t-shirt, trying to pull him closer. “We need to practice!”

Langa’s cheeks burned. “Wh—what?”

Reki gave an embarrassed sort of laugh, lifting his head and then dropping it back down, so his hair flopped all over the pillows. “C’mon,” he said. “We need to learn how to cuddle!”

“We don’t need to practice something like *that,* ” Langa managed. God, Reki really was going to be the death of him. “We cuddle all the time.”

Reki laughed again, shamefaced, his face rosy. “Lang *aaa,* ” he said, tugging harder on Langa’s shirt, and Langa toppled forward, catching himself against the pillows, staring down at Reki. Reki blinked up at him, surprised, his eyes wide and his lips slightly parted, and god, *god,* his mouth looked so *pretty* and Langa was going to *die* , and quickly he rolled away. He collapsed among the blankets and the pillows with his shoulder pressed, warm, to Reki’s.

Reki cleared his throat. “Langa?”

Langa squeezed his eyes shut. “Yeah?”

“Okay, so, hear me out,” said Reki, and Langa already knew it was going to be embarrassing, whatever he said. “When you’re cuddling, do you like being the big spoon better, or the little spoon?”

Langa felt like he was suffocating. “I—don’t know.”

“Okay, see!” said Reki, rolling over to face him, and Langa made the mistake of glancing at him—at his messy hair, his loose headband, his flushed cheeks. There was something determined around his mouth. “We need to try both. So you’ll know which one is best.”

He tugged on Langa’s shirt, and Langa let himself be pulled, burying his face into the cool pillowcase as their knees bumped together. “You just wanna cuddle,” Langa said, muffled.

Reki gave a breathless sort of laugh, latching onto Langa’s shirt again. “Mm, okay, maybe.” He tugged on the shirt. “Don’t you—want to?”

And, god, how could Langa say no to *that?* His skin burned under the place where Reki’s fist clutched at the thin fabric of his shirt, and he knew Reki didn’t care about practicing, he just wanted somebody to hold, god, he was allowing Langa to be that somebody, even if it was just for now.

“Yeah,” Langa mumbled, “I do,” and Reki grinned, his dimples deepening, his eyelashes clumping together in his squinty smile, and god, god, his face was so close, squished between Langa’s pillows and his hoodie.

Reki grabbed his arm and rolled over, dragging Langa with him so that Langa was pressed along Reki’s back, their feet fumbling together against the blankets. “You can…” Reki tugged Langa’s arm around him, pressing Langa’s hand into the soft, soft folds of his sweatshirt, and Langa buried his face in Reki’s shoulder, to stifle the whimper in his throat. He knew his heart was pounding, god, Reki could probably feel it, their bodies were pressed

together so close, and Reki smelled like DopeSketch and Langa's toothpaste, like pizza and warm nights at home.

Reki breathed out, long and slow, a sort of sigh, and Langa clenched his arm around Reki's waist, and when Reki's stomach jumped underneath him, Langa had to suppress a shudder. Then Reki sighed again, cuddling back against Langa's chest, and Langa's heart squeezed so tightly, so tightly. God. It felt so good to hold Reki like this, as if—as if he *belonged* to Langa.

He knew he shouldn't think like that. Reki's heart belonged to somebody else, somebody whose name Langa didn't even know, but he squeezed his eyes shut, holding Reki tight. He could feel Reki's frizzy hair tickling his face, he could feel Reki's one jiggling leg against his thigh, he could feel Reki's soft breathing against his chest. With his eyes closed, the only thing Langa could feel was Reki, warm warm Reki, nothing else.

"Good?" Reki mumbled, and Langa stifled another whimper, because he could *feel* the rumble of Reki's words.

"Nnghh," he mumbled, against the soft fabric of the sweatshirt, and Reki snuggled against him again, his heel bumping against Langa's ankle. God. God, Langa never wanted to let him go.

They stayed that way for so long that Langa could feel his heartbeat begin to slow down, even though he could still feel every throb against his ribs. He could feel every time Reki twitched or sighed, he could feel the way Reki pressed his toes into the blankets, he could feel the tiny shifts of Reki's shoulders as he got comfortable in his hoodie. Langa kept his eyes closed so the only thing he could breathe in was Reki, so he could feel every hitch of Reki's breathing, and god, he had never felt so in tune with somebody before, as though they belonged to each other, as though they understood each other. They had cuddled before, but never like this, never with Langa's cheek pressed warm to Reki's neck, his body wrapped around the curve of Reki's body, and even when he thought about how Reki must feel Langa's every movement, too, he only flushed a little.

When they were wrapped up in each other like this, everything made sense; *they* made sense.

“You wanna turn around?” Reki mumbled after a while, and even though Langa didn’t want to move, he nodded against Reki’s shoulder. Reki shifted against the mattress, his shoulder pressing into Langa’s chest, and Langa rolled over, too, squirming as Reki wrestled the blankets up over them.

And then Reki’s arm snuggled into Langa’s waist, tugging Langa against his chest, and Langa really *did* whimper.

He buried his face in the pillows, face burning. But Reki didn’t say anything, he just sighed against Langa, mumbling something into the skin above his t-shirt, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut. It was so *warm.* It was so warm under the blankets, with Reki’s soft sweatshirt cuddling against him from behind, Reki’s arm snug around his waist, holding him safe. Langa could cry from how *safe* he felt. He had thought nothing could feel better than holding Reki, but this was *so good,* Reki holding him, one of his legs coming up to hook around Langa’s knees, a heavy weight on top of him.

“You smell good,” Reki mumbled against his neck, and Langa shuddered, his hand twitching automatically to clutch at Reki’s wrist. Reki shifted, breathing out a laugh. “Oops, sorry, did I —did you hear that? Sorry.”

Langa couldn’t think of what to say. His brain was fuzzing out with the feeling of Reki’s palm flattening over his stomach, pressing Langa’s back to his chest, Reki’s chin nudging into his shoulder. Somehow Langa’s own hand was holding onto Reki’s hand, holding him, and Langa tried to breathe, tried to straighten out his brain into some kind of sanity.

“I—” His voice cracked. “I don’t smell like anything.”

“Mm,” said Reki. “Like your home, s’all.”

Langa took a breath, his cheeks burning. Reki thought his home smelled nice? He wanted to ask what his home smelled like, what *he* smelled like, but Reki nosed at his hair, sighing a little, and Langa’s brain short-circuited again.

“Which do you like better?” Reki asked, sounding drowsy. “For spooning?”

Langa squeezed his eyes shut again, dragging the blankets more tightly around himself. He wanted to fall asleep like this, with Reki holding him; he was sure he would have no nightmares with Reki holding him, safe. “I don’t know,” he mumbled into the pillows. “I...I like both.”

Reki laughed, and Langa shivered, because he could feel the rumble in Reki’s chest. “That’s no help,” Reki said, and he wiggled his free hand out of under them to smooth Langa’s hair away from his neck, and Langa shivered again, at the rough pads of Reki’s fingers against the delicate skin. “You always say stuff like that.”

Langa wanted to say he would like anything if it was with Reki, anything at all. But his heart was fluttering too fast, and he was afraid his voice would betray him, so he just made a noise in his throat, and Reki laughed again, pressing his face to the side of Langa’s neck, nestling himself against him.

“Such a good guy, Langa,” Reki whispered, and Langa bit his tongue, his cheeks going hot again, because, god, how could Reki just *say* things like that? Reki nosed at his hair, sighing against him. “You’re a good friend, the best, you know? You’re good at everything. Makes me feel like I gotta improve just to get on your level.”

“No,” Langa managed, but Reki just hummed against him, his breath hot against Langa’s skin.

“A good guy,” he mumbled, squeezing his arm around Langa’s stomach, and Langa buried his face in the pillows again, trying not to squirm. God. Reki shouldn’t — he shouldn’t say stuff like that, not while he was cuddling Langa against his chest, Langa would get the wrong idea, he was already getting the wrong idea. He tried to remind himself that Reki like somebody else, somebody he was probably thinking about holding right this minute, but then Reki whispered, “Can I try something? Real quick, I promise.”

“Mm.” Langa’s face was so warm. Even the pillow was warm, now, from his flush. “Uh-huh.”

He didn't know what to expect. Reki was already touching him in every possible way, his leg ticking Langa's knees, his forehead against Langa's hair, the soft collar of his hoodie smushed to the top of Langa's spine. Reki nosed at the nape of his neck, and Langa felt a warm press against the skin there, once and then, softly, again, and the realization sank in, that it was Reki's mouth, Reki was kissing him.

The shiver that went through his body made his chest squeeze so tight. Nobody had ever...and Reki had just…

"Sorry," Reki whispered against him, and *god,* Langa could feel the way his lips moved, a little scratchy but so, so warm. "I just wanted to try. Did it feel funny?"

"A—a little," Langa managed. He could barely breathe.

"Mm," Reki mumbled, and then he pressed his cheek to Langa's neck again, hooking his chin over Langa's shoulder, snuggling against him again. He stayed that way for a long time, and even though Langa's neck burned where Reki had kissed, his heart began to slow again, his eyes drooping. Everything felt soft and slow when he was wrapped up in Reki, in the blankets that smelled a bit like Reki, breathing to the rhythm of his chest.

"Thanks for cuddlin' me, Langa," he whispered, drowsy, after a while, and Langa tried not to shiver at the way Reki mumbled his name, clumsy and scratchy. "D'you wanna sleep?"

"Uh—" Langa did want to, he wanted to fall asleep just like this, god, he wanted to sleep the whole night in Reki's arms. But when he squinted his eyes open, he could see the bright light of the lamp burning through his eyelids, and he knew his mom would come in soon if they didn't turn it off. "Don't — don't move," he managed, pushing himself up onto his elbow, his heart thudding at the way Reki's hand fell away. Hastily he turned off the lamp, a sliver of moonlight peeking through the blinds, and snuggled back down against Reki's chest.

After half a moment, Reki tucked his arm around Langa's waist again. "Good?" he whispered, and Langa squirmed against him.

"Mm-hmm."

“M’kay.” Reki kissed his shoulder, feather-light, so light Langa thought maybe he had already fallen asleep and dreamed it. “G’night, Langa.”

“Good night,” Langa whispered, his throat tight and full, and Reki squeezed him again. Langa pressed his face into the pillows, and he thought desperately that maybe it would be okay if Reki liked somebody else, because he would still be here in the morning, holding Langa. They would still be together.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

sk8 has finished but I will go on !!!

Brief tw for Reki joking about how somebody might grope him on the train (don't worry, he is safe, but to skip, jump over the paragraph beginning "The train swayed under them, rocking Reki..."). Also, tw for discussion of nausea/motion sickness stuff (to skip, jump from "you're not scared, are you" a couple of lines down to "'okay!' said Reki, even more loudly.")

Also, for context -- Miguel is the first kiss that Langa references in early chapters, the one he has the nightmare about and the boy he tells Reki stopped being his friend back in Canada. Thank you all so much for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Langa managed to avoid the conversation with his mother until Friday, the night before he and Reki were supposed to leave. But then he made the mistake of coming out of his room for a snack after dinner, and she cornered him.

“Langa,” she said, crowding him against the cabinets, tugging nervously on her hair. “You know you can tell me about Reki, right? I think he’s such a lovely boy. I’m sure he’s a perfectly wonderful boyfriend, and—”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Langa said hastily, closing the pantry door. He could already feel a traitorous blush rising on his neck, and god, she was never going to believe him when he looked so *guilty,* was she? “He’s just...he’s just a friend.”

“Baby,” she said, and his stomach twisted a little at the way her eyebrows creased together—she looked so worried, and sort of hurt. She must think he was trying to hide this from her, that he didn't want to open up to her, even though they only had each other left, just the two of them in this big world. Langa squeezed his hands to his sides.

“Reki…” How was he supposed to explain? The words felt so tight in his throat, but he managed to say, “He doesn’t feel the same about me. I would tell you if we…”

And, god, he couldn't even finish the sentence, there was so much in that *if,* so much he couldn't say aloud, it was so huge and overwhelming and impossible. *If* Reki held his hand for a beat longer than he was supposed to, *if* Reki finally looked at him with those quiet adoring eyes the way he sometimes looked at the sunset, *if* Reki pressed his mouth to Langa's palm after bandaging the scrapes there, *if* Reki whispered soft loving words against Langa's mouth when they kissed, all the words Langa wanted so badly to say.

"If we were together," he finally said, lamely.

His mom was still frowning. She lifted her hand like she was going to touch him, but then she hesitated, twisting her hands together instead. Langa's stomach hurt. Ever since his dad died, his mom was so nervous and jumpy when she tried to talk to him or hug him, as if she thought Langa would push her away. Maybe she also had words bottled up, just like him, all this affection she wasn't sure how to show.

"Baby," she said, and then shook her head a little. "Then what's all this...this date stuff? I heard Reki calling it a date yesterday before you two came inside."

Langa flushed again. "He was just messing around," he said, even though he knew it sounded like a lie. "I mean—he was just joking."

She stared at him. Langa's cheeks itched, and he knew she didn't believe him, but he didn't know what else to say, so he blurted out,

"Can I have a snack?"

She paused, and then laughed a little, and this time when she lifted her hand, Langa leaned into the touch. He still felt stiff and awkward, his face warm with embarrassment, but when she squeezed his arm, some of the tension in his body drained away. Maybe, he thought, they would never really be alone, as long as they had each other.

“Okay, baby,” his mom said. “Come here.”

Langa climbed into a chair by the counter while she made him grilled cheese on the stove, and dutifully he answered all her questions about the trip: yes, they had already made the hotel reservation, yes, they knew how to make their train connections, and yes, Reki had shared his phone’s location with his mom.

“And you’re not planning on—on being intimate?”

Langa choked on his own tongue. “Don’t say it like *that!”*

His mom flipped over the sandwich. “Well, what do you *want* me to say?”

Langa was going to die. Just the feeling of Reki’s mouth on his neck had made him feel like his skin was going to burn off—Langa would never survive being *intimate* with him. “We’re not going to do—that,” he managed, and luckily his mom let the subject drop, although Langa’s palms still itched. He had a feeling that she was going to text him multiple safe-sex articles as soon as he went to his room.

And then, as she was putting down the plate in front of him, his mom said, “By the way, what ever happened to that boy you visited Japan with last summer? You never talk about him.”

Langa’s heart went cold in his chest.

He stared down at the food, his mind racing. Hunger was gnawing at his stomach, but suddenly he wasn’t sure he could eat. Why was his mother asking this *now?* She had never asked him about Miguel before. Langa had never even told her that they had stopped being friends, because they had moved to Okinawa so quickly afterward, and Langa had buried the memories of Miguel deep, deep inside.

“Uh,” he said. “We just...we...um.”

“Something happened between you two on that trip,” said his mom, watching his face, and Langa pressed his hands tightly between his thighs. “After you two came home, I never saw him again." Her voice was gentle, but it still hurt, somehow, when she said, "That’s why I’m so worried about this, baby, I don’t want anything to happen between you and Reki.”

Langa’s throat was so tight he couldn’t swallow. God. He didn’t want to think about ruining things with Reki, he couldn't think about that, but what if she was right? What if he tried to kiss Reki on the mouth tomorrow and Reki pushed him away with the same expression of disgust as Miguel? What if Reki made a face and said, *stop, Langa, that’s gross* ? What if Reki started avoiding him at school, what if Reki found new friends to sit with at lunch, what if they all whispered together behind their hands and stared at Langa, what if Reki no longer wanted to hang out with him?

“Nothing happened,” he managed to say, but when he escaped to his room with his cold sandwiches and sank onto his bed, he couldn't stop the memories from rising up again, worse and worse and worse than before.

Miguel had always mispronounced Langa’s name, like *lane-ga.* That was the first thing he remembered.

Other things, too. The way Miguel used to walk him between his classes, even though he was so popular, and he had so many friends, he was tall and handsome and always knew the right things to say. The way Miguel had chosen Langa to come on his family’s annual summer vacation to Japan, the way Langa’s heart had gotten all tangled up over it, nervous and excited because he thought the invitation *meant* something. The way Miguel had let Langa hold his hand on that trip, the way Langa had worried so much about being sweaty, the way Langa had stared at a boy’s mouth for the first time, wondering what it would be like to touch it.

Langa had assumed Miguel must feel the same thundering heartbeat as he did. He had thought Miguel must feel the same sweaty hands, the same racing thoughts. He had thought Miguel *must* like him the same way; it was the only thing that made sense.

When they returned to Canada, Langa had tried to kiss him.

He could still remember the way his eyesight blurred, the edges of his vision going white around him, when Miguel pushed him away.

Langa rolled over, burying his face in his pillows. He had misunderstood. He had misunderstood so completely, oblivious Langa, airheaded Langa, stupid stupid stupid Langa. Miguel had always teased him about that, *oh look! Langa misunderstood again,* whenever Langa sat in the wrong place during pep rallies or got terribly lost in group conversations, but the words had never sounded angry until the day Langa tried to kiss him. Langa had misunderstood something far too important. He hadn't meant to, he hadn't *meant* to, but he had, and everything had gone wrong after that.

He tucked his knees up to his chest, balling himself up on top of his mattress. All of a sudden he ached for Reki to be here, cuddling him. When Reki was holding him, all of Langa's horribly awkward pieces fit together, somehow, and he could finally relax, he could finally feel safe. He just wanted to feel Reki's arms around his waist, Reki's warm cheek pressed to the back of his neck, Reki's raspy breathing against his skin. Reki would never push him away like that, angrily, his voice breaking into the fragile cracks of Langa's body. Loving Reki felt so much warmer than loving anybody else.

Langa squeezed his eyes open just enough to pull his phone from underneath his body. He just wanted to scroll through his texts with Reki, to re-read his most treasured one (*you're my favorite person <3,* sent at 2:33 am) *,* but when he turned on the phone, his home screen was full of new messages. Langa rubbed at his eyes, bringing the screen close to his face so he could read them.

langa langa langaaaa, Reki had written, and then,

are u excited for tomorrow???

better hype yourself up!!! im not gonna go easy on you

im looking up romantic compliments as we speak, you better be prepared dude !!!

my sister said that before a date you're supposed to text "we still on for tomorrow?" in case the other person cancels

but i know you're not gonna cancel

and if you did i would come over anyway and drag you outside

so don't freakin cancel !!1!!!1

heh now i'm getting mad at my hypothetical boyfriend hypothetically cancelling on our hypothetical date

anyway!!!!

txt me back so i know you're not getting The Talk from your mom rn >:(

Clumsily, with his heart in his throat, Langa messaged back,

I am not getting The Talk

...anymore

Reki messaged back immediately.

GODDAMMIT LANGA

Langa hugged the phone to his chest, closing his eyes and breathing out again. Reki was excited about the date. He wanted to bring Langa to a summer carnival, and he wanted to have a good time, maybe he would even hold Langa's hand and share a bed with him in the hotel. And it would be good, it would be good, because this time, Langa would be very careful not to misunderstand anything.

The next morning Langa made a poor decision.

It was just. It was just so *early,* barely five-thirty am, and his bedroom was dark, and Langa fumbled around brushing his teeth, tripping over things. Reki wanted them to be at the train station early, but Langa's brain was blurry and incoherent and he couldn't stop yawning, pulling limply on his closet door, forgetting how to turn the handle. So when he tugged open his dresser drawer and his hand found the smooth fabric of the crop top, he barely processed pulling it on.

Under the bright lights of his bathroom, he gazed blearily at himself. Why had he ever thought wearing the shirt was a bad idea? It looked good. It looked good, and Reki would like it, because he had liked the flowery crop top on that girl...the girl in DopeSketch...the girl who Reki liked, Langa couldn't remember her name, but Reki liked her and maybe he would touch Langa's waist and like him, too. Langa touched his own waist. Yes…this was good...he looked good.

There was a niggling feeling in the back of his head, something he had forgotten, so he pulled on his blue t-shirt, too, smoothing down the front until the niggling feeling went away. Then he yawned again, stumbling out of his bedroom and out the front door.

His hands trembled, sleep-clumsy, on the keys as he stuck them in the lock. He checked his phone, tying a slow reply to Reki, who had messaged *i'm outside!* seven minutes ago. Then Langa yawned again and dropped the phone into the canvas bag he had packed last night, full of sunscreen and water bottles and the gummy candy that made Reki hyper.

He stumbled down the apartment stairs. All he could think about was how much he had wanted Reki to hold him last night and how he was finally about to have it—Reki's arms around him, Reki's breathless laugh in his ear. His bones ached with excitement. Tonight he would get to sleep next to Reki, he would be able to hug him, he would wake up with his face pressed to the softness of Reki's sweatshirt, and he would smell like Reki, and his whole body vibrated with how much he wanted those things, that soft, warm comfort.

His feet hurried clumsily down the path to the road. Reki's red hair blurred against the gray of the early-morning sky, and he waved, calling Langa's name, and Langa could only think *hug him hug him hug him* before he toppled right into Reki's arms, his arms around Reki's shoulders, and everything in his body stuttered to a stop.

Ah, he thought, brain muddled and sleepy, *yes, this is good.*

He breathed in. God, Reki smelled so good, and he was so *soft,* his skin warm in his tank top, and Reki did that adorable little breathless laugh against him. His arms felt so nice when they settled around Langa's back, pulling him close. Langa wanted to squeeze, he wanted to bury his face in Reki's shoulder, but his brain said, *be gentle, he is precious,* and so Langa eased his grip, holding Reki as tenderly as he could. He breathed in again, his hands splayed across Reki's back, and just *reveled* in the feeling of touching him.

They had only been apart for a night. But it had felt like so long.

Reki squeezed, just softly, and Langa choked out a noise. Their chests were pressed together, and he wanted to feel Reki's heartbeat, he wanted to squeeze Reki, too, he wanted to hold Reki forever. Could they?...but no, the train, they had to go to the train...but Langa pressed his mouth to Reki's shoulder, *gentle, gentle, he is precious,* and breathed in again. Reki smelled like home. Like safety. Langa was home.

He could cry with how good it felt.

"Hey, man," said Reki, softly, a sort of laugh in his voice, like music, and Langa raised his head again, mind swimming. Reki's hands came to cup his waist, steadying him, and Langa wanted to cry again, because why had he put that second shirt on? He wanted Reki's hands against his skin. He swayed a little, and Reki squeezed, laughing a little. "Man, you're really out of it, huh?"

"Ah," said Langa, coherently.

Reki laughed again. Langa loved his laugh, god, had he told Reki that?

"It's a good laugh," Langa said, aloud, and Reki snorted a little, squeezing his sides again. Ah. Didn't he know that he was going to make Langa fall apart, if he kept touching him that way? Langa swayed again, and Reki said,

"Dude, my dude, you can sleep on the train, okay? But we have to get there first." There was a smile in his voice as he took one hand away, flicking gently at Langa's forehead, and Langa would have whined at the loss of touch if Reki hadn't slung his arm over his shoulders immediately and tugged him toward the street. Reki was shorter than him, so it was sort of an awkward pose, but Langa bumbled along next to him anyway, trying to swallow another yawn and then another and another.

He barely remembered getting to the station or climbing onto the train. Once they were seated, Reki guided Langa's head to his shoulder, and Langa closed his eyes, swallowed up by blissful darkness. It felt so good, the warm weight of Reki's arm around his shoulders, Reki's hand squeezing his upper arm. Reki smelled like sunscreen...and yes, the pier, the beach, ah, their date. Langa was on a date with Reki. He had forgotten. He was on a date with his favorite person in the world, and…

He mumbled against Reki's shoulder, trying to sit up. This was a date. It was a date, and on dates Reki would kiss him, Langa would be allowed to kiss his mouth, god, his mouth. Had Langa dreamed up his mouth? He must have...it was so perfect...and it felt so good to kiss, the best thing in the world, the sweetest rush to his head. Unsteadily he put his hand on Reki's chest and mumbled again, trying to make Reki understand.

"Wha'd'you need?" asked Reki, squeezing Langa's arm again. "Whatever you need, man," and his voice was swaying with the train, "you just gotta tell me."

"Wanna kiss," Langa mumbled, and Reki choked on a noise, not quite a laugh, it didn't matter, nothing mattered because suddenly his hand was cupping Langa's jaw, so warm, and his palm felt so good, the little cuts and ridges and rough edges of the bandaid. Langa nearly whined, because he wanted a *kiss,* but then Reki leaned in and brushed their mouths together and Langa's body sagged.

Yes, he thought, because Reki's mouth was gentle and warm and, *good, yes, good.* Reki pulled away and Langa made a discontented noise, so Reki leaned in again, the softest kiss, the briefest brush of lips and Langa wanted to say *more* but then he thought *no, he is precious,* and this time when Reki pulled away, Langa sank back onto his shoulder. Maybe Reki thought he was precious too, he thought drowsily, and with that thought, he drifted away into dreamland.

Langa was jolted awake by a particularly bumpy stretch of train track. His head bounced painfully against Reki's shoulder, and Reki groaned, his knee knocking against Langa's.

Head swimming, Langa opened his eyes, squinting against the bright sunlight filling the train. His mouth tasted like cotton, and Reki's head tilted back against the seats, his headband

pulled low over his face, and Langa's hand caught on something in the jumble of their bodies.

He glanced down blurrily, and all of a sudden his heart stuck in his throat. Reki was holding his hand.

Langa tried to swallow, but his heart was beating against his lungs, his pulse so fast he could barely breathe. Reki's fingers were caught between his own, their matching nail polish bright against his jean shorts, his palm pressed to Langa's. Reki made a garbled sound, like he had been sleeping too, and then suddenly his whole body jolted. "Ah—shit," he said, and quickly he pulled his hand away.

Langa's heart only beat faster. Reki cleared his throat.

"Sorry," he said, and his voice was scratchy, even when he gave an embarrassed sort of laugh. "I guess I fell asleep too, huh? Ah—um, I think, I think we have to switch trains soon."

Langa did his best to nod. He sat up straighter, rubbing his palms against his shorts, trying not to remember the feeling of Reki's fingers laced with his own, the way one of Reki's knuckles was knobbly and crooked from a broken finger. It was very bright in the train, the sun high in the sky, and Langa's heart began to flutter in his throat again, because they were on a date, he and Reki, and maybe they could hold hands again later, for a longer stretch of time, maybe even for a whole hour.

And then Langa remembered begging for a kiss in the early, early morning, and he flushed all over again.

God. God. And Reki had *given* him the kiss, Jesus Christ, he didn't have to do that. Langa should have known better. He wanted to smack himself, but the train was already screeching into the station, and Reki was clambering up. "C'mon, this's our stop!" he said, grabbing Langa's elbow, gathering their canvas beach bags off the floor. "Man, we're really lucky we woke up."

Langa stumbled after him, clinging onto the back of Reki's shirt. His heart wouldn't settle down. God, Reki looked so cute when he had just woken up, his headband crooked, his shirt rumpled, his hair sort of flattened down on the back of his head. Langa ran his fingers through the flattened hair, trying to fluff it back up, and Reki made a raspy sound in his throat, tilting his head to give Langa a sloppy grin.

Langa grinned back, heart thumping. Reki tugged on his sleeve, just a little, and Langa's stomach suddenly dropped into his feet when he remembered.

Oh god.

Oh god, he had put on the crop top, that morning, in his bathroom. Oh god, he was *wearing* it right now, under the blue t-shirt Reki had bought for him. Oh god, oh god, what had he done?

He stared at the station racing into view through the train windows, his mouth slightly open in mortification. Had he really thought it was a good idea to wear the crop top on their date? Had he really thought he would want Reki to *see* it? No. Jesus Christ. Langa tugged on the bottom of the blue t-shirt, desperately, trying to tuck it into his shorts without Reki noticing. It would be okay, he told himself, Reki would have no way of knowing, except god what if the collar of his blue shirt was too loose and the crop top peeked through and, and —

The doors opened, and Reki tugged Langa out onto the hot sidewalk.

Langa stumbled again. There were so many people at the station, throngs of people, all of them wearing sundresses and summer clothing and straw hats, and Langa clung tightly to Reki's hand as they wove through the crowd. It was okay, he tried to tell himself again, it was okay, Reki wasn't going to notice the crop top. Langa would keep the t-shirt on all day, and as long as Reki was holding his hand, he was safe, he was secure.

Reki pulled him through a group of moms and toddlers, toward the new train they were supposed to board, chattering over the noise about their plans for the day. "Dude, we have to ride all the spinning rides!" he said. "I mean, if you're not scared. You're not scared, are you?"

“No,” said Langa, trying to focus on the sound of his voice. “But you’re probably going to throw up.”

It was just a fact, not even a diss, but Reki groaned loudly, squeezing his hand. “I’m not gonna throw up! I don’t get motion sick.”

“Yes you do,” said Langa. Reki’s hand was so warm in his own, and it felt good to hold it, so good. “Remember that one time in Shadow’s car? When we were going to get burgers?”

“Okay!” said Reki, even more loudly. “Okay, that was *one time!* One time, Langa, jeez, let a guy live.” He squeezed Langa’s hand again, his band-aid rough against Langa’s palm, and Langa felt a smile tug at his mouth. He was pretty sure Reki was squeezing out of frustration, not affection, but if that was how he wanted to vent his frustration, well, Langa could be okay with it.

The tracks began to rumble with the incoming train, and Langa held tightly to Reki’s hand, waiting for the doors to slide open. But when Reki pulled him up the stairs and onto the train, crowding them against the people in the aisle, Langa’s heart began to pound in his chest again, because the train was *packed.*

Langa swallowed hard. Reki’s shoulder was jostling against him, and so many people were crammed into the train that they had no hope of finding a seat; Langa could only hope that they could find a place to *stand.* The train doors slid shut, and Reki tried to turn to face him, but they were wedged too tightly together.

“Crap,” said Reki, and Langa swallowed again.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His chest was pressed awkwardly to Reki’s shoulder, their feet bumping against each other as Reki tried to rearrange their bags. A mother with a stroller was directly at Langa’s back, so he couldn’t move even an inch, and his hands were already beginning to sweat again. Reki was *so close.* His frizzy hair was tickling Langa’s cheek, sunburnt and soft, and when Reki shifted, Langa could feet the way his arm rubbed right over his heart, and god, his rapid pounding pulse.

This was not good.

“I’m fine,” said Reki, frowning. “What about you, man? Are there too many people? I guess —they must all be going where we’re going, huh? Sorry, I didn’t think—”

“It’s okay,” Langa said quickly, because a crease was forming between Reki’s eyebrows, and he didn’t want Reki to worry that the date wasn’t good enough, like he had messed up somehow. This day was supposed to be about helping Reki feel like he *was* good enough, that he was romantic enough and sweet enough and that anybody would be lucky to date him. Langa swallowed again, jostling against one of the poles as the train swayed on the tracks. “Could you just… could you just, um, keep holding onto me?”

Reki’s eyebrows darted up, and he glanced quickly down at their hands, sweaty and scratched up and clutching each other. “Oh,” Reki said. “Of course, man! Of course. Does that—does it help?”

He looked up at Langa again, and Langa’s heart squeezed against his chest at how close his face was, so close that he could see the faint summer freckles burnt onto Reki’s nose, the faded lines of his dimples, the stray hairs of his wild eyebrows. Reki looked so *alive,* his face bright and open, here in the sunny train, with the world racing by under their feet.

“Yes,” Langa said, and Reki squeezed his hand again, comforting, a small smile tugging at one corner of his mouth before he smothered it.

“Okay,” Reki said, and his voice sounded lighter, somehow. “Cool! Cool. Anything for you, my man.”

Langa’s throat squeezed around his heart when Reki tangled their fingers even more tightly together. *Don’t say that,* he wanted to say, because he already knew that he would keep begging for more and more of Reki, if he was allowed. He would ask for more time, more dates, more kissing until finally one day Reki would have to let him down gently, tell him, *man, my man, don’t you think this’s a little much?*

It would never be too much for Langa. He tightened his hand around Reki until their palms pressed flush together, holding on to him.

The train swayed under them, rocking Reki against the glass windows of the door, and at the next stop, they had to press away from the doors as even *more* people climbed on. Reki squeezed his hand, tilting his face closer to Langa's to say over the noise, "I hope nobody tries to grope me!"

Langa's head spun, suddenly afraid. The doors slid shut, and all he could manage to say was, "Wh—what?"

Reki laughed, nudging his stomach with his elbow, and Langa's brain nearly shorted out. "I'm just teasing!" Reki said. "Y'know, 'cause it's a crowded train."

He watched Langa's face, grinning like he was waiting for Langa to get the joke, but Langa's head was suddenly full of images of people trying to *touch* Reki, people putting their hands on him, on his arms, on the small of his back, and he had to shake his head hard to clear it. No. Reki was—Reki was precious. He must be kept safe.

"Okay," Langa said, but it was so loud in the train that he barely heard it, and he could only think, *protect him.* The people around them shifted again, and Reki stumbled a little, his body jostled back against Langa's front, Langa's face suddenly full of his hair. Langa tried to move out of the way, so that Reki's back wasn't pressed so firmly to his chest, but there was no room. He swallowed again, with difficulty, because he could already feel the blush darkening on his face. God. Reki was—he was so warm, and his tank top was really thin, wasn't it? Langa could feel the damp spot of sweat on Reki's back, the way Reki's body kept getting jostled back against him, elbows bumping Langa's arms, his legs knocking against Langa's knees.

"Sorry," Reki said, turning his head and making a face at Langa, and Langa's throat stuck, because it sort of looked like—like Reki was blushing, too, but it must be the heat, just the heat. Because two seconds later Reki was tilting his head back against Langa's shoulder, his hair flopping all over Langa's neck, and saying, "Man, it's so freaking warm in here! Hold me up, Langa."

Langa's face was so flushed. He could barely breathe, because Reki's hair was warm and damp against his shoulder, and he smelled like sunscreen. Langa was so afraid somebody would try to touch him, and he couldn't let that happen, because Reki was precious, Reki was precious and Langa wanted to keep him safe, the way Reki always made sure he was safe. Carefully Langa wrapped his arms around Reki's stomach, dragging their clasped hands with him so that he was caging Reki in against his body. There, he thought, his cheeks aching with the blush, now everybody would know that Reki was his.

God. He needed to stop.

But…

But Reki just made this sort of contented humming sound in his throat, shifting his weight onto his other foot, and Langa's throat burned, his face flushed even warmer. God. He had so bad, he was acting possessive over something that didn't even belong to him, not really. He dropped his chin onto Reki's shoulder, squeezing his eyes shut as if that could make the blush fade away somehow.

Reki smelled *so good.* Langa wanted to cry.

For a long five minutes neither of them moved, they just rocked with the motion of the train, Langa's mouth buried in the thin fabric of Reki's tank top. The top of Reki's shoulder was sunburnt and freckled and warm, and Langa had to keep his eyes closed tightly so he wouldn't think about kissing it, even though all he was thinking about was kissing it. They were on a date, weren't they? And he had his arms wrapped around Reki's waist, holding Reki against him, so would it be so bad to press his dry, chapped lips to the flushed skin on Reki's shoulder?

But before Langa could crack and beg for another kiss, Reki tilted his head, lifting it slightly off of Langa's shoulder to say in his ear, "Hey, so, remember those romantic compliments I was looking up? Like, for practice?"

A shiver ran through Langa's body again, and he lifted his own chin with difficulty. His head felt all clumsy and blurry with the warm press of Reki's skin, god, the brush of Reki's frizzy hair. Langa wanted to run his hands through that hair all day, but he just tightened his clasp around Reki's waist and said, "Ye—es? I think?"

“Yeah,” said Reki, and he made a face again, dropping his head back onto Langa’s shoulder. “I looked for *two hours,* but none of them were, like—right? For you?”

Langa’s chest squeezed. “What—what do you mean?”

The train swayed around a curve in the tracks, and Langa clutched at Reki more tightly, his heart sinking rapidly. Had Reki really looked for two hours and not found *any* romantic compliments for Langa? Was Langa really so—so unlovable? Of course he had known the compliments would just be for practice, they wouldn’t be real, but he had thought Reki would at least *try.* Langa had even clumsily drafted a couple of romantic things to say in his own notebook, although mostly in English, and he had lain awake for a while afterward, trying not to wonder what Reki might come up with.

He had sort of thought maybe Reki would compliment his hair or his eyes or something. Those things were—were okay, right? Surely Reki could have found at least *one* thing to compliment, couldn’t he?

“I don’t mean—” Reki made a face, lifting his head again, and Langa’s heart gave another painful squeeze at the way Reki’s sweaty hair stuck to the back of his neck. They were standing *so* close. “I just, I mean, they were all so—cliché? Like they sounded like they were from a cheesy movie and, I don’t know, it didn’t feel right.”

The pain eased a little. So maybe it was the compliments that were the problem, and not Langa. “Why not?”

“‘Cause—” Reki frowned, his mouth working for a moment. God, the way his tongue poked into his cheek, the precious little gap between his crooked front teeth. “They were all stuff like, *your eyes are like the ocean,* which is kinda true for you I guess? But I don’t know. It didn’t feel real enough.”

Langa’s heart throbbed, just once, maybe a little hopeful. “Real like how?”

Reki frowned again. “I don’t know,” he said. “Ugh! I’m just not romantic enough, you know? Like, if we were really on a date, I’d wanna sweep you off your feet with stuff about your ocean eyes and all that crap. But when I tried to write stuff down, all I could come up with were stupid things like, oh you're so much fun to be around, I like buying you sodas from the vending machine ‘cause you always light up when I do it. Like, you always get all awed by the tiniest stuff, and it makes everything feel new and exciting even if we’ve done it a million times before. Y’know?”

Langa’s heart throbbed again, and his whole body felt warm, all the way down to his toes. The train swayed again, and this time Reki leaned against his chest more heavily, his shoulders relaxing, and Langa’s throat was so, so full. Reki felt excited around him. Reki, who was always chasing some kind of excitement, felt happy around Langa, who sometimes got tripped up by things that came so easily to everybody else. Reki *liked* it, that Langa was so easily startled, so wide-eyed at all the things around him.

“Really?” Langa couldn’t help saying, because it felt good, Reki thinking nice thoughts about him, and Langa’s head felt sort of stupid from the smell of Reki’s sunscreen. Reki nodded against him, the train rumbling underneath them so hard that for a moment Langa could feel Reki’s shoulder blades, sharp against his chest, the prickle of his arm hair and the rough fumble of his heel against Langa’s toes.

“Yeah,” Reki said, making a face again. “But like! That’s not romantic, it’s just the same crap I always tell you. I wanted to say this one compliment about, like, how your smile is like the sun, but I couldn’t make it make sense in my head! Your smile’s not like that. It’s like—it’s sort of just special, y’know? ‘Cause some days I think you forgot how to smile, but then I go and eat pavement or something stupid and there it is, and man, man.”

He was quiet for a moment, Langa’s heart thundering along with the rumble of the train, and then Reki said, in a burst,

“I don’t know how to make it sound good! Argh. I tried for so long, man, I’m sorry. I’m disappointing you already.”

“No,” said Langa, his face hot with the flush, his heart pounding so much, and god, he must be so red but who wouldn’t be? Reki had just said his smile was *special.* That was so much better than any silly metaphor about the sun, Langa never understood those metaphors anyway, but Reki had sat around thinking about his smile, trying to find the perfect way to

describe it. Langa thought his heart was going to pound right out of his chest. “No, that — that sounds good already. I mean, it’s kind of— it’s kind of romantic.”

Reki looked at him, out of the corners of his eyes, his eyes amber in the sunlight and Langa wanted to blurt out how nice Reki’s smile was, too. “What about you?” asked Reki, as if he had somehow heard Langa’s thoughts. “I bet you’d come up with the best romantic compliments for any girl, that’s why they’re all in love with you.”

I wouldn’t, Langa thought, because the only compliments crowding in his brain were for Reki, god, the only flutters in his chest were for Reki, the only love he had was for Reki, only Reki. “I like your dimples,” Langa blurted out. “They get so deep when you’re happy.” God. Was he really allowed to say these things? Quickly, before Reki tried to stop him, he added, “And the smile lines by your eyes, and the faces you make when you get annoyed with me, and the way you always smack me harder than you mean to. And you always put the band-aids on right. And the nail polish, you—you said you don’t have steady hands but they’re always steady when it counts, and—”

“Okay,” said Reki, hastily, a flush beginning to creep up his neck, but Langa didn’t want to stop, the words were already tumbling out of him, all these words he had wanted for long to say, god, Reki was allowing him to say them, all the things he loved about Reki that had been bottled up inside for so long.

“And I like how your laugh is so loud that I can hear it all the way down the hallway if I want to,” Langa said, “and I like how your voices changes when you’re talking to your baby sisters, like, it gets softer and you’re always so gentle with them even if you guys are roughhousing. And I like how much you talk. I like to listen and I always learn new things even if it’s just your thoughts about something and then I remember those things you said and think about them later, whenever I don’t have my own thoughts to think, and it’s so interesting, and—and I like it. I like it. And I like—”

“Okay!” said Reki, hurriedly, untangling one of his hands from Langa’s grasp and fumbling to put it over Langa’s mouth. Langa paused, his face so, so warm, his lips pressed against the sweaty skin of Reki’s palm. Was it—was it not okay? He had just wanted to tell Reki how wonderful he was, and he thought it was okay, just this once, because Reki had asked, but maybe he had misunderstood, and—

“Sorry,” Langa tried to say, but the sound was muffled by Reki’s palm, and when Langa glanced at his face, he could see how red Reki was, flushed all the way to his ears. Langa’s heart stuttered. Oh. Oh, Reki was—he was flustered. He was embarrassed. Langa’s toes curled in his sandals, trying to take it all in, the bright color of Reki’s cheeks, the way his eyes squinted up at the corners. Oh, he had always wanted to make Reki blush like this, he had thought about so much.

“Okay,” said Reki again, finally pulling his hand away, making a face. “Enough! Ugh. I knew you’d be better at this than me.”

It came out like a grumble, but Langa’s heart wouldn’t relax, it was tripping over itself at the blush high on Reki’s cheeks. God, he looked so pretty. God, would he allow Langa to compliment him again? Maybe later, at their hotel room? After all it was a date, and that was what you did on dates, complimented each other, Reki had said so himself.

“It was your idea,” Langa said, and Reki groaned.

“I forgot that you’re Casanova!” he said. “And on accident, too. Life is so unfair.”

Langa didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t matter, because the way Reki’s body pressed against his, warm and sweaty and a little too close, made him breathless enough.

Half an hour later, Langa had dozens of carnival tickets clasped in his sweaty hands, and he was blinking and blinking and blinking trying to take everything in.

His feet were rooted on the hot, hot pavement, and the rest of the world was whirling around him: people laughing with balloon animals bobbing over their heads, children running through the crowd, tall pink booths rising up against the blue blue sky, the spinning colors of a carnival ride at the end of the pier. There were so many sounds and smells, the sea-salt air lifting their sweaty hair off their necks, and one of Langa’s hands was clasped around their damp paper tickets and the other was clasped tightly around Reki’s.

“You good?” Reki said, his voice nearly lost in the jumble of sounds, and Langa blinked and blinked in awe at all the colors. They were overwhelming, but he also felt the tingles of excitement, the way he felt at S.

He nodded, and Reki squeezed his sweaty hand, and Langa’s whole body thrilled.

Laughter rose up from the crowd on every side as Reki tugged him, inch by inch, onto the pier, and Langa pressed his fingers to the rough skin on Reki’s knuckles. He still felt a little dizzy from the prolonged feeling of Reki’s palm against his, and from the swirling colors, the smell of fried food and beach, and his heart swelled up big in his chest. He was overwhelmed, not with nerves but with a sort of giddy happiness, because Reki was holding his hand and Reki liked his smile, and because everybody here seemed happy, too. Everywhere Langa looked were shorts and sunburned arms and white-sunscreened noses, dads handing cotton candy to their kids, and if everybody here was doing what made them happy, then Langa and Reki could, too.

“Hey.” Langa tugged on Reki’s arm, and Reki stopped, crowding back against a wooden bench with an ice cream melting onto it.

“What’s up?” he said, his tongue poking out of his mouth just a little, his face a little flushed and expectant, and Langa barely managed to swallow back his fluttering heartbeat before he leaned forward. His nose brushed the skin under Reki’s eye when Langa kissed his cheek, and then, oh, Reki’s face was so *warm* that Langa did it again, pressed his mouth to the soft, soft skin.

He pulled away, a little breathless. Reki’s face was even redder than before.

“What was—that for?” he choked, and Langa flushed warm himself. He wanted to rub his sweaty hands on his shorts, but both his hands were occupied, and he didn’t want to let go of Reki for anything.

“Because,” and oh maybe he should have asked first? but Reki had just looked so kissable, Langa could barely resist him, “because it’s a date?”

Reki's mouth worked for a moment, and Langa's stomach squirmed hot when he saw the way the flush reached all the way to Reki's ears. "Okay!" Reki blurted, his voice higher than normal, and he started fumbling in their beach bags for something—Langa tried to hold the edge of the bag up as best as he could, his heart still thudding against his chest. He hoped he hadn't done anything wrong, but Reki didn't seem upset, just a little flustered and oh, oh.

He wasn't used to it, was he? All the attention.

Langa swallowed, something new swelling in his chest. Reki wasn't used to the compliments and things because people never remembered to compliment him enough. And that was just —that was such a shame, wasn't it? Reki deserved to be praised and showered with so many kisses that his flush would travel all the way down his body, until he felt so stuffed full of the love that there would be no room to feel self-conscious. Langa wanted to praise him. He wanted to get Reki into a soft warm bed and cuddle him until Reki would never have to whine for cuddles ever again.

His whole body was flushed with the thoughts, as he watched Reki root around, mumbling something about a map they had gotten at the gate. Of course Reki probably didn't want Langa to do those things. When they went back home, Reki would begin searching for someone else to take on real dates, probably the girl he had a crush on. But this date was Langa's. This day belonged to him, and he burned with all the things he could say, maybe, if Reki would let him.

"Found it!" Reki tugged a wrinkled map out of the jumbled bottles of sunscreen he had packed. He rubbed at his face with the hand holding Langa's, so that Langa's knuckles bumped up against his nose, his adorable sunburned nose. "Okay, c'mere, let's sit down, I need to explain the rest of the date!"

"The rest of the— ?" Langa stumbled a little as Reki sat down on the bench, gingerly avoiding the spilled ice cream, pulling Langa with him. Their knees bumped together, and Reki dragged their hands to rest on his thigh.

"Yeah," said Reki, while Langa tried not to get distracted by the way his knuckles brushed against the frayed hem of Reki's cutoffs. "Okay so! Remember how I said it was gonna be competitive? That's why I got so many tickets!" He shook Langa's wrist, and Langa couldn't tear his eyes away from the chipped nail polish on Reki's thumb, bright orange against the

reddish flush of his hand. There were so many sounds and laughing people crowding past them but Langa could only focus on Reki.

"What do you—"

"We're gonna see who can win the most carnival games," said Reki, "and the winner gets to decide what we do when we get back to the hotel room! Like, do we go to the pool? Or do we try to sneak into the tropical bar? Or, like, I really wanna order room service but if I win then you have to pay for it!"

Langa managed to drag his eyes back up to Reki's face, eyes wide. He could—he could decide anything he wanted them to do? There was only one thing Langa wanted to do: lie atop the soft hotel bed and kiss and kiss and kiss until their mouths ached. Maybe Reki would even allow Langa to sit in his lap while they kissed, and oh, he had wanted to do that for so long. Reki could lean against piles and piles of hotel pillows and Langa could sink on top of his strong thighs, Reki's arms caged safely around his back, and Reki could *hold* him while they kissed and yes, yes, oh god please.

"Okay," he heard himself saying, and Reki tugged on the tickets, separating them with his clumsy fingers until they each had an even half.

"Okay?" said Reki, grinning, and Langa nodded, his heartbeat beginning to pick up pace again. Reki bounced up, dragging him off the bench, and then they were swallowed up by the shifting crowd of moving people, and Langa clung to Reki's hand for dear life, trying not to think about kissing him, about kissing him, about kissing him.

Chapter End Notes

Hi!!! You can thank lightblue on tumblr for me posting this chapter on time because of their GORGEOUS ART of the cuddling scene! When I saw this I legit got so excited and started writing way faster haha. Please please go see/share it!! They are so talented.

Also, if you have not seen here, here is more spooning renga from the last chapter <3 Thank y'all so much for hyping this on tiktok and tumblr!!! I truly can't express my gratitude enough.

Until next time!!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thwack!

"You almost hit it!" Reki cheered.

Thwack!

"One more time!"

Thwack!

Langa's arm burned. The burly man running the carnival game said, "Time's up," and Langa backed away from the counter, rubbing his wrist.

"It's rigged," he said, making a face. Somehow, in his desire to win, Langa had forgotten about his horrible hand-eye coordination. He had never been able to throw a ball straight or even hold a pencil steadily, a combination of shaky hands and terrible eyesight. Those things had never mattered when he was snowboarding, but they mattered now, when the stakes were even higher.

Langa had burned through almost all of his tickets already and he hadn't won a single thing.

"Aw, yeah, it's the crappy game, not you," said Reki, thumping his hand on Langa's back, and Langa tried not to twitch — could Reki feel the outline of the crop top under his t-shirt? — as the carnival man gave them an unimpressed look.

“My game’s not rigged,” he said, and Reki said,

“Well, let me try! Langa, hold my stuff.”

Langa barely had a chance to blink before Reki was piling all their things into his arms—both of their beach bags, his half-eaten cotton candy, and the three different prizes he had won already, because of *course* Reki was amazing at carnival games. Of course, of course. Reki was amazing at everything. The teddy bear plush slipped down the pile, and Reki grabbed it and shoved it up by Langa’s face.

“Stop,” said Langa, wrinkling his nose as the teddy bear tickled his mouth, and Reki laughed a little, crowding close to him, squeezing Langa’s arms and grinning up at him.

Langa scrunched up his face, trying not to flush. God, Reki was in his element here, bouncing around everywhere, cheering loudly at every carnival game, alive with the adrenaline of the competition that simmered low in Langa’s bones, and god, he looked so pretty, maybe prettier than Langa had ever seen him look before. The heat was radiating up from the pavement, and whenever Reki pressed close to him like this, Langa was sure his body was burning up from the inside out.

“Watch me!” Reki said, grabbed the baseballs from the counter, as if Langa’s eyes hadn’t been glued to him for hours and hours, for the whole day, for the whole time they had known each other. Reki wound up for his first throw, and Langa swallowed again, his throat dry and his hands burning, at the way the muscle in Reki’s arm strained.

Thwack!

“Yes!” Reki cried, and Langa winced at the sound of the bottles toppling down. Reki turned around, his face fiery with excitement, and Langa barely had time to brace himself before Reki threw his whole body into Langa’s arms.

Langa staggered at little, his grip on the prizes slipping dangerously, but then Reki snuggled his face into Langa’s cheek, warm, so warm, his hair everywhere, his arms around Langa’s shoulders, his body so close, and Langa nearly choked at the touch, at the smell of his

sunscreen and his sweat and god, god. “I won!” Reki cheered, against his ear, and he sounded so happy that Langa’s heart throbbed a little, and he could feel himself smiling as Reki pulled back.

God, he was so pretty when he was happy.

“You won,” said Langa, and then, because Reki deserved to know, he added, “I’m impressed.”

The color flushed on Reki’s face, and he laughed too loudly, as if he was embarrassed and trying not to show it. “It isn’t rigged after all!” he said, rubbing hard at the sunburn on his cheek. “Or, well, maybe it is and I’m just a genius.”

“Definitely the second one,” Langa agreed. His face was flushed, too, because Reki was still standing so close and god, god he looked so good.

“Damn it, Langa!” Reki laughed again, swatting at Langa’s shoulder, his face rosy. “You’re too good at this.”

“You’re the one who keeps winning,” Langa began, but Reki shook his head, his toes bumping up against Langa’s as he crowded even closer, a group of teenagers squeezing past them on the pier.

“Not at the games,” Reki said, his eyelashes all squished together with how hard he was grinning, and Langa nearly choked again, because god he was so pretty, he wanted to kiss him. But Reki just poked one of his flushed cheeks and then turned around again, pulling Langa with him, his hand tight on Langa’s wrist. “What did I win?”

The guy behind the counter rolled his eyes but pointed to the plushies hanging from the top of the booth. “Ask your boyfriend what he wants,” he said, a bit grumpily, and then muttered to himself, “Goddamn couples.”

Langa could feel his neck flushing even warmer under the sun. Reki laughed too loudly again, giddy and embarrassed all at once, and Langa thought he would correct the man, *oh now we're just bros!* but instead Reki jostled even closer to Langa's side and asked, "Wha'd'you want, babe?"

And, god.

If Langa's face got even warmer, he was going to pass out from heatstroke. Nobody had ever called him—and the pet name in Reki's scratchy voice, always tripping over itself with how fast he talked—Langa swallowed again. He felt parched. "You don't have to get anything for me."

Reki looked at him, incredulous. "What do you mean?" he said, and god, he was so close, his voice made Langa's brain screech in such a painfully pleasant way. "They're *all* for you."

He patted the pile in Langa's arms, and Langa's brain screeched again, this time in confusion. For—for him? He had watched Reki cheer with victory over all the games he won, clambering at the counters for his prizes: a huge bag of cotton candy, a rainbow bucket hat, the teddy bear stuffed animal. Langa could feel the heat rising in his neck again, warmer than before. He had been so bummed he was losing the competition — he had never thought that Reki was winning these things for *him*.

"I thought they were for your sisters," Langa said, dumbly, and Reki laughed, shoving at his shoulder.

"Dumbass!" he said. "Of course they're for you! Why would I buy my sisters stuff on our date? C'mon, pick something out."

Langa gazed wide-eyed up at the rows of prizes, his mind whirling, his heart pounding. All the colors clashed, so bright and distinct, like they would never blur together, never fade out into white nothingness. He could barely think, but when his eyes snagged in the corner, he said, "I like that one," pointing to a stuffed hamburger. It had a stupid grinning face printed onto its front that reminded him, for some reason, of Reki.

“Of course you want that one,” said Reki, grinning, shaking his head a little. To the carnival man, he said, “He loves food more than me!” and Langa bit back an embarrassed noise.

“No I don’t,” he tried to say, but Reki was preoccupied stretching up to grab the plushie as the carnival man unhooked it from its row, one of his hands still gripping Langa’s wrist. When he got a hold of the hamburger, the first thing he did was press it into Langa’s face, making kissing noises.

“Yes you do,” Reki said. “You wanna make out with it!”

“No I—!”

“Yes,” said Reki, laughing, pushing the plush against Langa’s chest and grabbing the other things out of his arms. “You love it. Admit it.”

Langa’s face was on fire. He held the plush carefully, because, well, because Reki had won it for him, and maybe now it belonged to him, and he was going to treasure it forever. “Well,” Langa said, “It’s kind of cute.” Reki grinned triumphantly, so Langa fumbled quickly for a teasing retort, adding, “But not as cute as you.”

“Oi,” said the carnival man loudly, “flirt somewhere else. I have a business to run.”

Reki’s face was pleasantly flushed all the way to the tips of his ears. “You’re the cute one, babe,” he said, and even though he knew Reki was just playing, Langa still felt a warm flush of heat in his chest. Reki began shoving everything possible into their beach bags, but Langa kept clinging to the plushie as Reki tangled their fingers together again, and together they headed down the boardwalk again.

“He thought we were a couple!” Reki said, squeezing Langa’s fingers excitedly. “We must be doing something right!”

Langa tried not to choke on his own tongue, his neck hot. “Yeah,” he said, and then, “You’re right,” because god, they really *did* look like a couple, didn’t they? Their hands were clasped so tightly together, their matching fingernails bumping against his thigh as the crowd jostled them always closer together, and Langa had to swallow when he thought of people looking at them, smiling at their young love.

God. Langa felt like the love was spilling out of every pore of his body. It must show in every fiber of his being, he thought, everybody must be able to see it. Well, everybody except Reki.

They bought food at one of the greasy food booths and searched and searched until they found a bench where they could sit. Reki kicked trash out of the way and dropped the bags at their feet, tugging the plushie out of Langa’s hand, and Langa realized he had been gripping it probably way too hard.

“Don’t get it dirty,” said Reki, a little cheeky. “It’s a token of my love.”

Langa swallowed, his cheeks tinting pink. “Stop.”

Reki snickered, dragging his feet up onto the bench so he could sit cross-legged, settling his food in his lap. Langa scooted a little closer to him, his face still warm, hoping Reki wouldn’t notice, even when their shoulders brushed together. His stomach growled, and Reki snickered again.

“I knew you loved food more than me,” Reki said, elbowing him, and Langa swallowed down a whimper. “That’s probably what you’re having all those dirty dreams about, huh? It’s not even a girl, it’s just you at an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

Langa pushed at the side of Reki’s head, weakly. “I can’t believe I lost,” he muttered.

“Huh?”

Langa shook his head. Reki's side was warm and sweaty, and when they were pressed so close together, Langa could feel every flutter of Reki's movements as he dug his chopsticks into the greasy food. "The competition," Langa clarified. "I lost, like, by a lot. I never knew you were so good with your hands."

Reki grinned, raising his eyebrows, and Langa felt another flush rise in his neck.

"I—I didn't mean— *that,* " he said. God, Jesus, fuck. "I just meant! With the balls, and—" Reki started laughing, and Langa shoved him, his face burning. "That's not what I meant! Stop. You know what I mean. I have horrible aim."

"Aw, Langa," said Reki, rubbing his eyes, grinning. "Such an innocent perv. But I love you for it."

Langa swallowed, shoving him again, but not hard, not hard enough to actually shift Reki's body away from him. And then Reki settled back down even closer than before, leaning into Langa's shoulder, and Langa's hands fumbled so much with his chopsticks that Reki started laughing again.

Finally Langa was able to spear the dumplings with the tip of one chopstick, and they both ate quickly, messily, watching the people go by, the spinny rides whirling beyond the tops of the colorful booths. Langa hadn't realized until now how starving he was, how delicious the food tasted as he shoveled it down, how warm and contented he felt when he had finished. Even his feet were sunburnt, he realized, when he wiggled his toes in his sandals, but it was a good feeling, like all his skin had come to life in a way it never had in Canada.

Reki rubbed his mouth with his wrist. "Have you seen anyone we know?" he asked, and Langa pressed his toes hard into his shoes.

"What?" He glanced around the pier, but the crowds of faces were all indistinguishable, and Langa's heart thudded against his ribs. Maybe he *had* seen someone he knew, while they were running around the carnival games, and maybe he hadn't even noticed, because he could never recognize people even if they recognized him. What if Reki had seen some of the girls from their class? What if the girls had seen them?

Reki nudged him. “Relax, dude,” he said, as if he had read Langa’s mind. “I haven’t seen anyone. Except I sort of thought I saw my preschool teacher for a second, but it turned out to be somebody else.” He slurped his soda, and Langa tried to wrap his head around that, remembering the face of somebody you knew when you were four. “I wonder if we’ll see anybody from our class, though? I think Nanami was saying she wanted to come see the carnival.”

Langa made a face. “Why were you talking to her?” He would never forget the way Nanami told Reki to change his hair, the sight of his wet bangs plastered to his face after he washed all the conditioner out. “I don’t like Nanami.”

Reki shrugged, crumpling the soda in his hands. “I was just eavesdropping on her conversation,” he said. “Not on purpose! But I had to stay after class the other day because Kadokawa-san was telling me my math was all backwards again, on the quiz.”

“But you’re good at math.”

“I was distracted that day,” Reki explained. “Y’know, ‘cause I was trying to book our hotel.”

Langa felt his hands burn. “During class?”

“Yeah,” said Reki. “What, was I supposed to do it at home? With my sisters poking their noses into my business every two seconds?” He stood up, aiming his empty soda at the trash, and then he grabbed Langa’s trash off his lap, too. “Can I go buy you an ice cream cone?” he asked, flicking at Langa’s ear, and Langa tried to swallow, tried to focus on Reki’s voice and not the warmth of his body pressed against Langa’s knees. “And you can watch our stuff?”

Langa swallowed again. “Okay,” he said. “I can give you money this time. Let me pay.”

Reki shook his head hastily, his hair flopping around his face. “Nah, I got you, I got you, man!” he said. “I wanna buy it for my bae.” He reached out, squeezing Langa’s shoulder, and Langa flushed at the pet name, even though it was silly, because it was so *Reki* that it made him warm all over . And then Reki touched his face, rubbing at the corner of Langa’s mouth. “Hang on,” he said. “You have some—okay, I got it.” He paused, his thumb lingering by

Langa's lips, and Langa's throat was too dry to swallow again, so he just stared up at Reki, bright, vibrant Reki, sunburnt and sweaty against the blue, blue sky.

Reki hesitated for another moment, but then he leaned down, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, and Reki kissed the corner of his mouth, an almost-kiss.

"There," he mumbled, ruffling Langa's hair, and when Langa opened his eyes, Reki gave him clumsy finger guns and hurried away toward the ice cream booth.

Langa rubbed his sweaty, sweaty hands on his shorts. He felt so warm, his heart vibrating in his chest, sitting there with the touch of Reki's mouth burning on his lips and all his presents jumbled up at his feet. If this was what a date with Reki was like, then god, it was perfect, so perfect that Langa never wanted it to end. He wanted every day to be a date with Reki. He just, he felt so *full,* so alive with all of the running around, their sandals slapping against the pier, the fierce competition, his arm burning with the effort of throwing darts with all his strength at balloons that wouldn't break.

God, but he wished he had won. He ached so badly to be able to end the date with a long, slow makeout session in their hotel bed. They could lie on top of the comforter, smelling like sunscreen and beach, and kiss until all they could taste was each other. Langa wanted to know the different noises Reki might make, how he might look if Langa were allowed to lay on top of him, dipping down to kiss him, their skin rough and warm and clumsy against each other. Langa wanted to kiss and kiss and kiss, and maybe order room service and eat waffles in the bed and then kiss the butter off each other's mouths, he wanted to kiss until the sunburn on their lips was rubbed raw beyond repair, he wanted to kiss until they fell asleep in each other's arms.

And, *and,* and he had wanted to win Reki a prize, too. At one of the booths, Langa had seen these tie-dye sweatpants that looked so soft and perfect, and this Pokémon plushie that he knew Reki would secretly love, because he was always saying Charmander was better than Squirtle (Langa's choice). And these gummy necklaces that Reki could wear and eat at the same time, he would think that was peak fashion, he would find it so funny. Langa pressed his toes to the bags full of things Reki had won for him. He felt showered with affection, and the tiniest bit guilty—Reki deserved presents, too, so many presents. Maybe Langa could buy him a present when they got home? And he could pass it off as a thank you, and not because he wanted to spoil Reki, god, his stomach clenched so much when he thought about spoiling Reki.

Reki shoved his way back through the crowd a few minutes later, holding a towering ice cream cone in each fist. “Langa!” he cried, wiggling around a dog on a leash. “Chocolate or strawberry?”

God, he looked so good, his hair messy around his face, the collar of his loose tank top falling over his collarbones as he approached. Langa tried to swallow away the squirm in his stomach at the sight of the tanline around Reki’s neck. “I want strawberry,” Langa said, because this was his date and he was allowed to be selfish, and then added, “Please,” as Reki’s knees bumped his. Reki laughed a little.

“So polite,” he teased. The ice cream swayed dangerously as he held it out, and Langa reached for it, but his knuckles bumped against Reki’s and suddenly the ice cream was falling.

Langa tried to jolt away. But it was too late — two scoops fell right into his lap.

“Crap!” said Reki, staring down at him, both of them frozen for half a second. Then Reki was scrabbling at the front of Langa’s shirt, trying to grab the ice cream with his bare hands, and Langa pressed himself hard against the back of the bench.

“Cold,” he blurted, even though really his stomach was beginning to burn with the feeling of Reki’s hand in his lap, the way Reki was touching him. Reki swore under his breath, a clumsy sound, and Langa felt even hotter at the word, so he pushed Reki away and stood up.

Most of the ice cream fell onto the pavement between them with a *splat.* But the front of Langa’s shirt was sticky and stained.

“Aw, man,” said Reki, staring at it. “I’m so sorry. Crap. Crap, I ruined your shirt! And after we just bought it, too! Argh!” He flailed a little, and one of the scoops of ice cream slid off the remaining cone and splattered onto the pavement, too.

“It’s okay,” said Langa, quickly, trying to hold the front of the shirt away from his skin. He bit hard on his tongue, watching the way the drops of ice cream rolled down toward the hem, dripping down onto the ground. He already knew the solution that made the most sense. He

knew, but he wasn't sure he had the guts to do it, not without his face burning off with embarrassment.

God, Reki was going to *know.*

"I'm so sorry, I'm so freaking sorry," Reki was saying, over and over, "I'm so sorry, Langa! Do you want me to buy you another shirt? Or—wait, you can take mine, we can switch!" He was already pulling up the hem of his tank top, and Langa caught a flash of wispy red hair and a skateboarding scar before he squeezed his eyes shut, grabbing Reki's arm.

"Stop!" he said, because, *god.* The thought of putting on Reki's shirt, damp with his sweat, warm from his body — god it would *smell* like him. It would lie against Langa's *skin.* "Stop. I—I'm wearing another shirt under this one."

"What?" said Reki, and Langa squeezed his eyes even more tightly. God, he couldn't face Reki while he did this, he was already flushing hot enough, the blush creeping down his neck. With as much confidence as he could muster, Langa grabbed the hem of the shirt and pulled it up over his elbows, getting his head stuck in the fabric, tugging hard and shaking his hair out when he finally got it off.

He could already feel his bare skin burning in the sun, and he kept his eyes squeezed shut for another beat, praying that Reki wouldn't laugh. Then he squinted his eyes open, and god, Reki was *staring* at him.

"Oh," said Reki, his voice sort of scratchy and high-pitched, his lips parted, his eyes huge. "Oh." A ragged breath in, his hands limp at his sides, and then he said, again, " *Oh,* uh—"

"Don't," Langa choked, resisting the urge to cover himself up. In the open air, the crop top felt shorter than ever, exposing his stomach, the bony edges of his hips, the ugly appendix scar along his right side. "It's—I was half-asleep, and for some reason I put it on."

Reki's eyes were glued to his torso. "Uh," he said again, his eyes still wide, color high on his cheeks, and Langa buried his face in his hands, wanting to die, because god how could Reki just *look* at him like that? Langa's skin felt like it was going to burn off under the weight of

his gaze, and then Reki was crowding closer to him, saying, “Hey, hey, sorry,” and he grabbed Langa’s wrist. More of the ice cream fell to the ground, forgotten. “I’m sorry. It’s okay! You look good in it, remember? It’s okay! It’s okay!”

“Doesn’t it look weird?” Langa managed, letting Reki drag his hands away from his face. God, Reki’s face was so close now, his eyes so big, his damp hair caught under his headband, the sunburn peeling on his nose. Langa tried not to squirm, because *god* Reki’s eyes were so big, and his palm was squeezing the pulse point of Langa’s wrist and god, what if Reki thought he was a freak?

“No!” said Reki quickly. “No, dude. I’ve—I’ve seen, like, eight people in crop tops today.” His voice cracked a little, his cheeks pink, and he tugged on Langa’s wrist again before dropping it, pulling up the hem of his tank top again. “Look!” he said, his voice cracking again. “I have the same scar.”

“Wh—what?”

“Look,” said Reki, pushing his toes against Langa’s, and reluctantly Langa let his eyes drop down to Reki’s waist again, swallowing hard, trying not to look at the tangled hair leading from Reki’s navel to the hem of his shorts. He could see now—what Langa had thought was a skateboarding scar was surgical, the edges puckered, white against Reki’s brown skin. “See?” said Reki, kicking his foot again, clearing his throat. “We’re the same.”

Langa swallowed again. He wanted to look at Reki’s stomach forever, the soft dents of his hip bones, the waistband of his boxers peeking over his shorts, but he forced his eyes back up to Reki’s face. Reki looked flushed, but it must just be the sunburn, or maybe he felt embarrassed about Langa wearing the stupid, stupid crop top that Reki had definitely bought on accident.

Langa cleared his throat. “Okay,” he said, as convincingly as possible, and Reki carefully tugged the sticky t-shirt out of Langa’s clenched fist, stuffing it into their beach bag. It was like he was trying to avoid looking at Langa, now, busying himself gathering up the bags, and Langa’s stomach clenched, because he didn’t want Reki to stare at him except—except some part of him sort of did? It was horrible. It was like, if Reki touched the sides of his waist he was going to die, but if Reki *didn’t* touch the sides of his waist he was going to die, and, and —

“I can’t believe I screwed up this bad,” Reki muttered, half to himself, and quickly Langa tried to swallow down his own burning embarrassment, because, oh. Reki felt bad, and Reki shouldn’t feel bad, Reki should *not* think that his date was anything short of exceptionally perfect.

“No,” said Langa, and Reki glanced at him, cheeks scrunched up, and Langa hurried to say, “I don’t—I don’t care about the shirt. Or the ice cream.” Reki made a face, and Langa swallowed hastily, trying not to think about his bare torso, and said, “You won me so much stuff already. You don’t need to buy me anything else.”

“But I wanted to,” said Reki, a sort of whine edging in his voice, and Langa’s stomach squirmed, hot. God. How come all of Reki’s different voices sounded so *good?* All he could think about was Reki whining for Langa to come cuddle him, to come kiss him, and god, *god.* “I wanted to spoil you,” Reki said. “That’s what you do on a date!”

“You already did,” said Langa, trying to shove down the blush. God, he must look so red right now. “It’s a good date, Reki. You’ve done everything—perfectly.” *You’re perfect.* “Anybody—anybody would have fun on a date with you.”

Reki screwed up his face again, like he didn’t believe Langa, and Langa had to swallow away all the other things he wanted to say, like, *it’s been the best day of my life, can we please do this again, please if I’m good can I have just one more date?* Maybe Reki would agree to practice one more time and Langa could plan a date for him, a day where he would take Reki shopping wherever he wanted to go and buy him anything he wanted, he would give Reki so much attention, he would save up so many compliments so that when they were alone together, he could finally, finally allow them all to burst out.

But Reki was already tossing the melting chocolate cone into the trash, running his fingers through his messy hair. He glanced at Langa’s stomach again and then quickly looked away, puffing out a breath. “C’mere,” he said, looping his hand around Langa’s wrist and tugging him back toward the pier. “I’ll find something else for you, to make up for it.”

“You don’t have to—” Langa began, but Reki was already pulling him along, his hand sliding down into Langa’s so that their palms were pressed together again. Langa swallowed. Reki still seemed like he was averting his eyes, like the sight of Langa’s pale stomach was too

embarrassing to endure, like maybe Langa should be ashamed of himself for ever imagining that Reki would like the shirt.

Langa squeezed Reki's hand a little desperately. Reki squeezed back, right away, his fingers clasping firmly around Langa's hand, and the knot in Langa's chest relaxed just a bit. Okay. Maybe it was okay. He was holding onto Reki, now, and even though he still felt flushed and sort of exposed, Reki's hand was warm and rough and Langa knew he was safe.

They squirmed back through the crowd, heading back down the pier the way they had come. Nobody gave Langa any weird looks or stared pointedly at their clasped hands, so Langa squeezed Reki's palm again. He was still a little afraid that one of the girls from their class would spot them and call them out, but if they did, surely that would make fun of Langa, instead of Reki. Langa was the one wearing a stupid half-a-shirt, and he would rather they laugh at him, anyway, as long as nobody laughed at Reki, and—

Reki pulled up short. Langa nearly bumped into him.

"Hey!" Reki said, dragging their clasped hands forward to point. "Look! D'you wanna do the photo booth?"

Langa looked. The photo booth was crammed between carnival games, a tiny box with curtains on either side, stickers of balloons and cotton candy plastered to the walls. He nodded quickly, because he wanted photos, so he could remember this day, even if he looked stupid and embarrassing in all of them. "Okay."

Reki tugged him over, fumbling for cash in their bags until Langa handed him some from his wallet. "Thanks," Reki said, poking his tongue between his teeth as he fed the money into the machine, and Langa tried not to watch, but he couldn't help it, because Reki's mouth was so —so nice and so red and so kissable and Langa really, really wanted to kiss him all of a sudden.

He tried to swallow. They would be hidden away from everybody inside the photo booth. Maybe Reki would let him—

“C’mon!” said Reki, scrambling inside, and Langa stumbled hurriedly after him.

Inside there was a tiny seat and a tiny camera, and Reki crammed himself into one corner, pulling Langa down next to him. They barely fit, and Reki glanced at Langa again, at his face and then down at his stomach and Langa swallowed, hard.

It was very warm. He could feel Reki’s breath in the small space.

“Sorry,” said Reki, his face red, and Langa bit his tongue so he wouldn’t ask what Reki was sorry for—for crowding so close to him, for staring, or for the way his elbow kept bumping against Langa’s waist. Langa felt flushed everywhere they touched. Reki’s knee was pressed against his, the solid weight of his hip against Langa’s, the burnt skin on his shoulders so, so hot when his arm brushed against Langa’s. Clumsily Reki leaned forward and pressed the start button on the camera, and then sat back, his eyes darting down to Langa’s collar again.

Langa swallowed. “Is there something—”

Wrong, he was going to say, but Reki made a face and blurted, “No, no, I wasn’t looking! You’re fine. You’re normal! It’s fine,” and Langa felt flushed all the way down his body, for some reason. Reki was just, he was just so cute, and he seemed so flustered over nothing and now Langa was flustered, too, his neck warm, and it was so hot in the tiny booth.

The camera began to tick down, and Reki shoved his arm between Langa’s back and the wall, grabbing Langa’s upper arm and tugging him closer. “Smile!” he said, his voice still a little choked, and Langa blinked in surprise, his senses all going hyperfocus on the way Reki’s fingers gripped his shoulder, and the camera flashed bright in his eyes before he could blink again.

“I forgot to smile,” he said, a bit dizzy from the flash, and Reki made a sound in his throat.

“Don’t forget!” he said, and then, “Here!” and Langa barely had time to process before Reki was pressing his face against Langa’s cheek, his mouth warm against the blush there. Reki was kissing him. Reki was kissing his cheek, and Langa’s whole body burned with *warm,*

alive, kiss and *Reki Reki Reki* before the camera flashed again. Langa blinked. Oh—he had forgotten to smile again.

Reki pulled away, but his body was still pressed so close and their tangled hands were resting on Langa's thigh and Langa's brain fuzzed back to, *warm Reki kiss Reki,* so he turned and smushed his own face to Reki's cheek, his mouth pressing against Reki's jaw, and Reki made a soft yelping noise as Langa kissed him once, twice, again. God. Reki's skin was so warm and frayed from the sunburn, his thigh firm and soft all at once, his ankle bumping against Langa's among all their bags on the floor.

Langa could feel the flash of the camera more than see it. He meant to pull away, but before he could, Reki turned his face and Langa's mouth bumped against the corner of his lips and, and oh, oh, Reki's mouth was so warm and chapped and *right there* and god Langa wanted to kiss him, Langa wanted to feel that dry heat against his own lips, and then Reki made another muffled sound, and, *oh.* Their mouths fumbled together for a moment, and Reki made a sound in his throat, pressing closer, even closer, and Langa's head swam.

Ah.

Reki bumped their noses together, breathing hard into the space between them, but he only hesitated for a moment before leaning in again and kissing Langa again, breathless, like he couldn't wait another second, like he couldn't get enough of Langa. Every time their mouths separated they found each other again, and again and then again, and even though the skin on Reki's mouth was cracked, the kisses were so soft, so good. Langa squeezed his eyes shut. He loved Reki, he loved him, he knew the photos were over but he just never wanted to stop loving Reki, he never wanted to stop kissing him.

"Yeah?" Reki gasped, pulling back again so that their noses brushed together, rubbing Langa's knuckles, soothing, grounding. "It's good?"

"It's good," Langa gasped back, because, because of course it was good, Reki's kisses has always been so good, and Reki made a sound in his throat and leaned in again, breathing,

"Wanna be good,"

and then he was kissing Langa again, and Langa squeezed his hand, wishing and wishing and wishing that he could tell Reki just how wonderful he was. Then Reki tilted his head, and their mouths slotted together, and Langa couldn't stifle a soft whine, because god Reki's mouth was *perfect,* all of him was perfect but the way he kissed—the way he kissed with his *whole body,* his arm surging forward to cup Langa's jaw, his legs pressing closer, his mouth sucking on Langa's bottom lip like he had been starving for it—god, Langa nearly whimpered again. It felt so good. God, even when Reki pulled back to heave a breath and then pressed closer again, Langa's heart didn't stop stuttering, he could barely think of anything besides *Reki Reki Reki.*

He loved him. God, it was overwhelming , being able to kiss Reki after being stuffed so full of love for him all day, after flushing warm every time Reki got up in his space to tease him, all the *babe* s and the hand-holding and the presents crowded into Langa's arms. Reki, the brightest, most alive, most perfect person, the sun itself—Reki was allowing *Langa* to kiss him.

And, god, the kisses felt so good. How had Reki ever thought he needed any practice? He was so eager and gentle all at once, the way he held Langa's face with just the right amount of pressure, the fumbling way he moved his mouth, pulling away and kissing the corner of Langa's mouth and then hurrying to kiss him fully again, their noses bumping. Langa's heart swelled so big against his ribs, so big he was sure it would burn right through his skin and pour all over them, all his feelings spilling over, because god, god, god if only he could kiss Reki like this always.

Reki pulled away a little, mumbling a "sorry" against Langa's mouth, as if he still thought he wasn't good enough, as if he had anything to apologize for. He rubbed his thumb over Langa's cheek, kissing his nose clumsily, and Langa shivered in the stifling warmth of the photo booth. God. God, he wanted to tell Reki he was perfect, that he never needed to be sorry for anything, but Reki said, "Sorry," again, a little breathless, kissing the corner of Langa's mouth, and Langa only managed,

"It's okay,"

and thought, *I love you,* before he leaned forward to chase Reki's mouth because, because, because it was the only way he knew how to show Reki that he was good, that he was kissable, that he was lovable, *god* he was so lovable. Langa wanted to kiss him forever, he wanted Reki to hold him in the baking heat of the summer, he wanted Reki's hands to grip at his sweaty skin. Reki made a raspy sound and kissed back, his tongue swiping over Langa's

bottom lip for a moment, warm and wet, his bandaged fingers clumsily tucking Langa's hair behind his ear.

Langa shivered. Reki's hand fumbled over his ear, settling under his jaw, cupping Langa's neck gently, so Langa could feel the band-aid on his palm against the tender skin there. Reki mumbled, "Langa," against his mouth, pressing his thumb to his Adam's apple and Langa nearly whimpered, or maybe he *did* whimper, it was hard to know, all he could focus on was the pads of Reki's fingers burning into his skin, the warmth of Reki's mouth pressed flush against his own, the way Langa could feel his heaving breaths every time he pulled away.

He was so good. Langa tried to whisper it between kisses, *good, good* and *Reki,* because god Reki deserved to know, and he was kissing Langa so well, and god imagine how good he would be when he was kissing somebody for real, and that made Langa's throat swell a little, as if he was going to sob, so quickly he reached for Reki's face, too, holding onto him tightly.

"Langa," Reki mumbled against him again, a little desperate, maybe, and Langa's stomach squirmed.

"It's good," he breathed back, and Reki made a stifled sort of sound, embarrassed, maybe, or flustered, and Langa kissed him again. He managed to suck Reki's lip into his mouth, clumsily, and the sound Reki made against him made Langa's heart stagger, swelling even bigger in his chest. God. Langa did it again, pressing his teeth lightly against Reki's lip, and Reki made the sound again, shifting on the seat, his knee knocking against Langa's, and Langa tried not to whimper when Reki pressed his thumb to the pulse point on his neck.

Reki made a raspy sound in his throat and tightened his grip on Langa's arm. His tongue touched the seam of Langa's mouth again, and Langa could feel the flush rising on his own face as he gently pressed his own tongue against it, and Reki made the raspy sound again, and all the butterflies squirmed in Langa's stomach. He sort of wanted to use his teeth again, because Reki had liked that, Langa had always had a feeling somehow that Reki would like it, ever since he brought it up on the first day they kissed, but he had never had the courage to try. But with Reki's hand sliding along his neck, burying itself in the hair at the back of his head, Langa felt like he was going to melt, like he could do anything.

"Can I," Reki breathed against his mouth, and Langa nodded, his head completely gone, trying not to whimper when Reki's hand slid down his arm. He had no idea what Reki was

asking for, but Langa would trust him with anything, god, he felt so safe in Reki's hands, so *held together,* even though his heart sometimes stuttered so hard he thought it would fall apart.

Reki let go of his arm and tugged hesitantly on the hem of the crop top, and Langa whimpered against his mouth, and Reki paused, his hand hovering over Langa's waist, and god, god Langa wanted him to touch. He tilted his head and kissed Reki again, and then again, and again, trying to say *please please go ahead* and finally, carefully, Reki settled his hand on Langa's side, pulling him closer, and Langa's chest heaved with how good it felt, god, Reki's rough calluses on his skin.

Reki squeezed his waist, just the tiniest bit, and Langa's heart stuttered again with a sudden thought so big it overwhelmed him.

What if Reki liked—

No.

But, but—but Reki seemed so—so into this, he liked when Langa licked at the corners of his mouth, he kept making all those sounds in his throat. What if he was into *Langa,* not just the kissing? Maybe he had liked seeing Langa wearing the crop top, his pale skin burning in the sunlight, maybe he had wanted to touch Langa the way Langa had wanted him to. Maybe, maybe he—

Langa tried to shake himself, but it was hard, with Reki's warm hand cupping his waist, with Reki's sandal pressed against his own. He couldn't afford to misunderstand this. Reki had only promised one date, one day when they could pretend to be a couple, only that and nothing more, it would be wrong for Langa to ask for more. He couldn't misunderstand. He *couldn't.*

But still, still, it felt so good, Reki's mouth warm against his, his free hand still buried in Langa's hair. Maybe Reki liked kissing him, at least. Just the thought alone made Langa's head swim. All the things from their date had made his judgement blurry, all the times Reki had squeezed his hand today, the way Reki's breathing was heavy and irregular now, his thumb rubbing Langa's side just a little, over and over. Langa tried to remember that it was just for practice. He tried to remember not to misunderstand. He tried, he tried, he tried.

“Mm,” Reki mumbled, kissing his mouth again and again even as he finally pulled away, and Langa blinked his eyes open, squinting against the sunlight. His mouth felt a bit sore, and his breath kept sticking in his throat, and god, Reki looked all ruffled and adorable, his tank top sleeves awry, his headband crooked. He rubbed his face with his hand but held onto Langa’s waist with the other, and Langa tried to swallow, his throat so, so dry, and hoped Reki would never let go.

“I forgot to smile,” Langa managed, because he didn’t know what else to say, and if he didn’t say *something* then he was going to blurt out that Reki was the best kisser in the world and could Langa please marry him? Reki gave a sort of breathless laugh, nudging their knees together.

“Wha—what are you talking about?”

“For the pictures,” Langa said, stupidly. “I forgot to smile.”

Reki looked at him, still trying to catch his breath, his smile crooked, the little gap between his teeth peeking through, and Langa tried to swallow again, because, god. Reki looked so good after being kissed, his face flushed, his hair messy, his lips bruised and swollen. “I’m sure you looked good anyway,” Reki said, his voice kinda breathless and mushy and affectionate, and Langa tried to shove down his swelling heart, because he knew Reki was only using teasing. Reki cleared his throat and said, “You’re always so handsome. Prince Langa! You look good in every photo.”

Langa flushed, shoving his hands between his thighs. “Nobody calls me Prince Langa.”

“I do,” said Reki, leaning forward and tugging the photo strip out of the machine, his other hand still warm against Langa’s side, holding him as if Langa was his girlfriend, as if Langa was precious to him. He held up the photos. “Look, you’re smiling here!”

Langa blinked. Oh—he *was* smiling, in the photo where Reki was kissing his cheek, and he flushed even more, pressing his toes into his sandals. God, he looked so—so in love, his cheeks rosy, his eyes squinched up, his smile soft and hesitant and god, was that what he always looked like around Reki?

A sudden fear touched his stomach. Did Reki know? What if he had noticed how much Langa stared longingly at him, what if he had figured out how much Langa liked kissing him. What if Reki already knew how much Langa liked him? Was he just politely dodging the conversation so that he wouldn't have to hurt Langa's feelings? Langa stared blurrily at the last photo in the strip, the one where they were kissing, his hands twitching. God. Reki must know. He had to.

But—but Reki still wanted to be his friend, didn't he? Reki hadn't left him. He wasn't grossed out by it. Langa swallowed with difficulty. Maybe Reki was willing to tolerate a little loving, as long as Langa never said anything about it aloud.

"We'll have to hide this from my mom," Reki said, stuffing the photos into their bag, and Langa could hear the embarrassed sort of laugh in his voice, he could see the flush on Reki's ears, and his hands twitched again, burning a little. Reki rubbed the back of his neck and eyed the curtains. "Think anybody tried to peep on us?"

Langa's face was so hot. "No," he said. "I would have noticed."

Reki laughed, shamefaced, dropping his hand into his lap. "I wouldn't have," he said, and then stood up abruptly, dragging his tank top sleeve back into place. "Okay! Okay. We should probably go before the carnival police come to arrest us for, ah, not being family friendly enough."

He was joking, Langa could tell, but there was something forced in the words that Langa couldn't figure out. But he swallowed back the question, because if Reki wanted him to know he would tell him, so Langa got to his feet, trying to stretch out his cramped limbs in the tight space. Reki laughed a little when Langa's hand bumped against his chest, but instead of swatting him away, Reki closed his hand around Langa's wrist and slid it down to his palm, lacing their hands together again.

Langa swallowed, his palms suddenly sweatier than ever. God. All the hand-holding was really going to his head. After this date, how was he ever going to manage walking around with his hands empty, trying not to look longingly at Reki's bandaged fingers while they ate lunch together?

“Ready?” Reki asked, still a little breathless, his face flushed. Langa nodded, grabbing the bags off the floor, and for once Reki let him carry them, crowding after Langa as they exited the booth. The open air was cool on Langa’s flushed skin, and god, they probably looked obvious, he thought, tumbling out of the photo booth with ruffled hair and red-stained cheeks and rumpled clothes. “What do you wanna do next?” Reki was asking, and Langa glanced around him, at all the bright colors and laughing people and cotton candy booths. He squeezed Reki’s hand. He wanted to do everything, and he knew that whatever he said, Reki would say yes and drag them enthusiastically in the right direction, and god, was there anybody more wonderful in the whole world?

They got their faces painted in a tiny colorful booth and rode all the spinny rides Reki wanted, and as the sun was sinking low in the sky, they waited in a long, long line for the Ferris Wheel. Reki chattered for nearly half an hour about the way the carnival rides were constructed (sloppily) and all the things that could go wrong (many) and the best way to climb down the Ferris Wheel if it suddenly screeched to a halt while they were at the top. It was probably not the best thing to talk about on a date, Langa thought, but he was interested to learn, so he nodded along to everything Reki said, silently glad that he wasn’t afraid of heights.

When they finally reached the front of the line, the carnival attendant buckled them in, and after a lot of creaking and grinding, the Ferris Wheel soared upward.

Langa gazed in wonder at the world underneath them, the huge expanse of water, all the twinkling lights blinking on as the sun set, the tiny dots of people crowding around the pier. Between them, Reki squeezed his hand against the seat, and Langa took in a deep breath of the cool ocean air.

It felt good in his lungs. Reki swung his feet, his toes clenched around his sandals so they wouldn’t fall off.

“Was the date good?” he asked. “Like, did you have fun? No, wait, I mean—like, was it romantic enough?”

“It was perfect,” said Langa, his eyes still roving over the magical world below them, awed at the way everything seemed so huge and so tiny all at the same time. Reki elbowed him a little, laughing, leaning against Langa’s shoulder.

“C’mon, man,” he said. “Give me something to work with! Like, what could I have done better?”

Langa wracked his brain, trying to come up with something about the date that had been less than perfect, besides the fact that it wasn’t technically real. He couldn’t; every minute had been packed with Reki’s vibrant energy, his love for the world, his palm in Langa’s. “Not spilled ice cream on me?”

Reki kicked against his ankle, but then he laughed again, sort of shamefaced. “Ah, fair enough.”

“Can we go see the water when we get down?” asked Langa. The ocean looked impossibly wide and sparkling in the orange light, always moving, beautiful in a way that took his breath away. The Ferris Wheel seat reminded him of a ski-lift, sort of, but the view was so overwhelmingly new.

“Ah,” said Reki. “Of course! I almost forgot about that. Crap, it might be dark by the time we get off, though. Is that okay?”

Langa nodded. He squeezed Reki’s hand again, because he didn’t want Reki to worry that he had mistimed things. “I wanted to ride the Ferris Wheel first,” he said, which was true, even though he had mostly wanted to because Reki wanted to, and Langa wanted to do anything that made Reki happy. Reki made a contented sort of sound in his throat, swinging his legs again, and when his feet hit the glare of the setting sun, the crooked straps of his flip-flops and his wide toes were bright against the light, and Langa thought he had never seen a view more beautiful in his life.

The Ferris Wheel crested over the top, scraping to a halt while new people clambered on below. Langa’s heart was very full and sort of peaceful, a kind of calm settling over his body, so high above all the other people, quiet and alone with the person he loved the most. “Can we kiss?” Langa asked, because he was sure, for the first time, that Reki would say yes. “Isn’t that what you do at the top of a Ferris Wheel?”

Reki made a sound in his throat again, nudging his thigh against Langa's on the seat. "So romantic," he complained, and when Langa glanced at him, he could see the color rising high on Reki's face. "How do you always think of the most romantic stuff? C'mere."

He touched Langa's chin, guiding their faces together, and they kissed softly, sweetly. Langa could taste the salty air on Reki's lips, he could taste the sunscreen Reki had sprayed over them less than an hour ago, he could taste *Reki,* the way his mouth was softer than before, maybe from all the kissing. Langa's heart pressed against his ribs as Reki smoothed his hand over Langa's jaw, cradling his face.

They separated, and when Reki opened his eyes, Langa could see the setting sun reflected there, shining off the amber-brown of Reki's irises. Their foreheads bumped together for the briefest moment, both of them breathing in quietly, and Langa's heart ached. If this was a real date, he though, this would be the part when he whispered, *I love you.*

"I hope all my dates are this good," he mumbled instead, and Reki grinned, slowly, his dimples deepening in both of his cheeks.

"I'm sure they will be," he said, in that teasing affectionate voice, squeezing Langa's hand between them. "Since you're what makes them good in the first place."

Langa's heart squeezed. He thought he might cry, at how full of love he felt, but instead he smiled clumsily, sure he looked dopey and lovesick and embarrassed, but it was alright, because it was only him and Reki in this rickety swinging seat, above the rest of the world. Reki squeezed his hand again as the Ferris Wheel lurched back into motion, and even as they descended back to earth, Langa felt different somehow, heavy with love and contentment, as if he had left a piece of his heart up there in the sky, and he knew he would remember this day forever.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO LOVELIES y'all are about to be fed so well! The artists for this fandom are truly the MOST TALENTED on earth - please see the most precious:

spooning renga from the amazing bxnnii_ on TikTok (please follow her, all her art is so pretty ahhh)

the sweetest scene from chapter 2 from the lovely keebokuun on tumblr

and the prettiest crop top Langa from the wonderful light blue on tumblr.

And also, here is their matching nail polish if you haven't already seen it.

Okay I'll stop talking now!! Until next time!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> hello lovelies! tw for Langa's dead father (skip from "Reki rubbed his wrist, without letting go of Langa’s hand" to “We understood each other"), and for discussion of surgery (skip from ""“The sunburn’s not bad." Reki repeated," to ""Yeah," said Reki. “I’ve always been a hoot!”"). otherwise please enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Langa was allowed to hold Reki’s hand all the way down to the water. Reki’s fingers were sort of sticky from the ice cream sandwiches he had bought them before they left the pier, and his palm was warm and sweaty, the worn band-aid peeling up at the corner, but Langa held tightly anyway. Everything in his life would be bearable, he thought, if only he could Reki’s hand always.

“Man,” said Reki, kicking up sand, “It’s so much quieter down here. I didn’t realize how loud it was with everybody around.” He squeezed Langa’s hand, looking sideways at him. “Are you sure it wasn’t too loud?”

“It was a little too loud,” said Langa honestly, squeezing back. His head ached a little, but it was a good ache, like the sunburn on his shoulders, surrounded by the silence of the sand dunes, the soft cawing of birds and the lapping of water. “It’s okay now. Really.”

“You should’ve told me,” Reki said, but he didn’t sound upset, not really. He swung their hands in between them, kicking off his sandals and then scrambling to pick them up, holding them in his free hand. “I like the way the sand feels,” he explained, when Langa raised his eyebrows. “You should try it!”

Langa wasn’t sure, but Reki’s grin was so convincing, the way his dimples were a little lopsided, deeper in his right cheek than in his left, his eyebrows raised behind his hair. So carefully Langa slid out of his sandals, picking them up gingerly, wiggling his toes in the sand.

“It’s warm,” he said, a bit dumbfounded.

Reki laughed, squeezing his hand with sticky fingers. “Yeah, Einstein,” he said. “It’s summer.”

Ah, Langa thought. *Summer.* He wiggled his toes again, watching the way the sand spilled over the edges, into little piles. There was something intimate about it, being barefoot together, Reki’s sunburnt toes digging into the sand alongside Langa’s own.

“Okinawa always feels like summer to me,” Langa explained, and Reki made a humming sound, swinging their hands again.

“I guess that’s true,” he said. “Well — I wouldn’t know. I’ve never even left the country. Man! My life is really boring now that I think about it.” He rocked on his feet a little, the sand sliding off his toes. “How many countries have you been to? A bunch, probably, right?”

Langa shook his head. “We went to the United States once,” he said. “But that’s it.”

“Ah,” said Reki. “Still! Cooler than me.” He tugged on Langa’s hand, and Langa shook the sand quickly off his feet and began following him again, over another sand dune and another, until they could see the edge of the water dark against the beach. Langa squeezed Reki’s hand, the overwhelming feeling beginning to swell in his chest again—he was going to see the *ocean.* The actual waves and the seaweed and the shells. Langa had only ever seen the ocean from an airplane seat, far, far away from the water.

“I like Okinawa,” Langa said, and Reki laughed again.

“Yeah, but I bet it’s not as cool as Canada,” he said, and then grinned at Langa, and the overwhelming feeling swelled against Langa’s ribs, because, god. The sun had gone down, but even in the dusk, Reki was stunning, the shadows of his collarbones deep and perfect, the dip of his neck dark against the sky, his cheeky smile bright and happy. “Hey, you should bring me to Canada sometime! That can be our next trip.”

Langa swallowed, at the way Reki bumped their shoulders together, his sunwarm skin brushing against Langa's. He wanted to go on another trip with Langa. He wanted them to go on trips together, and Langa clung to that thought even as he said, quietly, "Maybe in—in another year or so? I don't know if I'm...if I'm ready to go back yet."

Reki's smile faded a little, his face softening into something else, something that made Langa's chest ache. "Ah," he said, and squeezed Langa's hand. "Okay! Whenever you want. We can go somewhere closer to home for our next trip, then."

Langa nodded, his chest aching again. He wanted to ask Reki to say that word again, *home,* because for the first time in a long time it felt true, that Langa had found a home, maybe in Okinawa, or maybe in the warm clasp of Reki's sweaty hand. Maybe after this trip, Reki would sleep over in Langa's bed again, with his arms snug around Langa's waist, so that when he left, Langa's bed would smell like *home* again.

"Wanna jump over the waves?" asked Reki, when they stepped gingerly from dry sand onto dark, damp sand, and Langa stared in wonder at the white edges of the waves rising and receding at his feet.

"Jump?"

"Yeah," said Reki, dropping his sandals onto the sand and sticking his toes into the incoming spray of water. "Me and my sisters used to play it all the time when my d—when my mom would bring us to the ocean." He rubbed at his cheek, laughing a little, and Langa watched him. He wanted to ask if Reki had been about to say *my dad,* but then Reki said, "Basically, we just stand ankle deep and try to jump over the waves. It makes my sisters crack up, like, so much."

"Okay," Langa agreed, but when they waded into the water, he didn't jump. He just sucked in a breath and paused, staring down. The water was colder than he had imagined, and it felt bright and crisp on his sunburned feet, and Langa let out his breath in a *woosh.*

"Good?" asked Reki, stopping, looking at him.

Langa nodded. “It feels…” He searched for the word, but he couldn’t find it, and maybe there wasn’t a word for it, for the wonder of it all, the way the waves lapped at his ankles, the way the sand slid around under his feet, the way he could see his pale toes through the ocean, dark in the fading light. “It’s good,” he said, instead, and Reki squeezed his hand.

“Man,” he said, and Langa could hear the smile in his voice. “This was what I was saying on the train, y’know? About how you get so surprised by the small things. It’s like. It’s like, when I bring my sisters to the ocean, they just wanna run and scream and have me throw them in the water, like, a million times, but you just like to *look* at stuff. It’s amazing.”

“I’m appreciating,” said Langa, still watching his toes, watching the sand drift over them, only to be pulled back again by the ebb of the waves. Reki’s words felt warm on his skin. It was so nice of Reki to find these tiny things about him and praise them, he thought, it was so nice, and Langa wanted to share all the tiny things he loved about Reki, too. There were so many. Maybe when they got back to the hotel he would have a chance to tell him some of them.

“I know, man,” said Reki, his voice still heavy with that affection, and Langa felt even warmer. He liked seeing Reki’s feet move closer to his own, their arms brushing again. “I’m appreciating you appreciating. Man, it’s like, I never stop and *see* stuff until I see it with you.”

Langa could feel himself smiling. God. God, nobody had ever said anything so nice about him. “I never really think about stuff until you tell me your thoughts about it,” he said, and Reki laughed a little, a bit embarrassed, squeezing their hands again. Langa felt good. He felt at home. He felt like maybe he had always had a space beside him meant for Reki, and maybe Reki had had a space meant for him, too, and now they had found each other.

They stood still in the water for a long few moments, just watching the water, and then Reki said, “Hey, man, can I ask you something?”

Langa’s heart throbbed, once, in his throat. “Yes?”

Reki rubbed his wrist, without letting go of Langa’s hand. “You never talk about...your dad,” he said, awkwardly. “I was just wondering, like, what he was like. But you don’t have to tell me if—if you’re not ready yet or—or if it’s too personal, sorry, I’m just being nosy. It’s just

like, there's this big thing in your life and I don't know anything about it and I guess I'm just being selfish. Sorry. Sorry. Okay. You don't have to answer."

"No," said Langa, grabbing Reki's hand, where he was rubbing vigorously against the sunburn on his wrist. Carefully Langa guided Reki's fingers away from the sensitive skin. "It's okay. I just…I never know what to say."

Did Reki want to know how his dad had died? God, Langa hoped not.

But Reki just rubbed at the sunburn on his nose and said, "Like—like. Like, were you close to him? Did you talk about your feelings and stuff? Or was it just, like...manly stuff, like you just snowboarded together and watched sports on TV?"

Langa watched him, a sudden understanding dawning on him. Reki was asking because he wanted to know what it was like to have a dad—a real dad, not the asshole he had called a father. Langa swallowed and looked down at their joined hands, touching Reki's knuckles gently with his thumb, smoothing down the peeling edge of his band-aid.

"We were close," he said, and then he had to clear his throat, because he was beginning to feel a little choked up. "But we didn't really...we didn't really talk about our feelings all the time. We sort of—had our own language? I don't...I don't know the way to explain in Japanese." He hesitated, rolling the memories over in his mind. He and his dad had always understood each other somehow, without needing to say anything aloud; everything was muscle memory, from all their time on the slopes, from all the nights his dad sat Langa on his knee and pointed out the pictures in children's books. He didn't know how to explain, so he said, "We...I love him so much."

Reki made a sound in his throat, shuffling closer. Langa swallowed, and then he swallowed again, because his throat was full, and for a moment he thought he might cry, but then he swallowed a third time and the moment passed. Birds were still flying over their heads, and Langa could hear the waves crashing gently against the shore, and he squeezed Reki's hand.

"We understood each other," Langa said, and then he hesitated, because he could feel Reki watching him. "I...sometimes I don't understand things. You know?"

“Like because of the language?” asked Reki, quietly.

Langa shook his head. Everything felt big, for some reason: the new feelings of the ocean, the big, big sky overhead, the anxiety that consumed him sometimes, a wrinkle in his brain that he had never had the courage to explain to Reki. “I think it’s more than that,” he said. “It was that way in Canada, too. Sometimes I just don’t understand people, or why they do the stuff they do, like, like when a girl likes me, I never notice until you explain it to me.”

Maybe that was a bad example. There were so many things Reki had explained to him, the way tipping worked at restaurants, how to tell if teachers liked you based on how they responded to your emails, the difference between your mom being mad and being disappointed, and why one was worse than the other. Langa could have said one of those, but Reki didn’t say anything about the girls, he just squeezed Langa’s hand again and shuffled the smallest bit closer.

“You like when I explain stuff?”

Langa caught the note in his voice, not self-consciousness exactly, not desperation, but something in the middle, maybe hope. Langa nodded hastily. “It helps so much,” he said, and then the overwhelming feeling of love for Reki swelled in his throat and he tripped over himself to say, “I like it a lot. It’s—you have no idea. I like to hear you explain skating and, and, and the way you think there’s different leagues of people at school, like how some of them are cooler than the others and so they can’t be friends with each other, and, and it’s just. I never knew about that stuff before. So, so thank you. Thank you for explaining.”

Reki gazed at him, his hair drifting off his forehead in the gust of wind, his mouth twisted up in something like a suppressed smile—like the smile was so big he was afraid to let it show. “Of course, man,” he said, and his voice was strained with the emotion, and he squeezed Langa’s hand so tightly, so tightly. “Hah, I...I like to explain, y’know? Man, there’s nothing I like more than talking.” He laughed a little, his face creased and warm, red all over from the sunburn, and Langa’s heart throbbed again, but this time with love, with love for Reki.

“I like when you talk,” Langa said. “You could never—you could never talk too much for me. Just, just so you know.”

Reki's face scrunched up, his eyes squinting with the smile, his neck flushed with color, and he squeezed Langa's hand again. "Aw, man," he said, his voice still strained, and then he tugged Langa forward, so Langa stumbled against his chest, and then Reki's warm, strong arms were tight around his back, clasped between his shoulderblades. Reki's face was hidden, so Langa couldn't see his expression, but he felt Reki's shoulders shudder, maybe with a laugh or a sob or both, somehow, and carefully Langa put his own arms around Reki, too. He buried his mouth in Reki's shoulder, in the thin fabric of his sleeve, and breathed in the way he smelled, the way his chest rose and fell against Langa's. Langa could feel his own heart thundering against his ribs, and he knew Reki could probably feel it, too, but for once it was okay, because Reki was emotional, too, and they were allowed to be emotional together.

Langa loved Reki. He loved everything about him, even the messy parts, even the way he sometimes interrupted people in his eagerness to start talking, even the way he sometimes didn't notice that Langa was drifting off to sleep because he was so caught up in explaining some TV show. Langa squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his hands flat to the small of Reki's back, marveling in the feeling of holding his body. He loved Reki so much that he felt a little broken with it, but maybe that was okay, maybe it was alright to be a little broken sometimes, when it was just him and Reki.

Reki pressed his cheek against the sunburn on Langa's shoulder. For a long time all Langa could feel was his breathing, soft and slow.

The sky grew purple around them, and finally Reki stood up straight again, rubbing at his face. "Thanks, man," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Sorry. Crap. Sorry, I just...I needed that."

"Of course," Langa said, holding onto his shoulders and watching his face, the way Reki's sunburn was peeling on his nose, the textured skin on his cheeks, the soft hair on his upper lip as he rubbed at his mouth. Langa wanted to kiss him, but he wanted to hold him more, he wanted to stroke Reki's hair and tell him he was wonderful, that he had changed Langa's life. "Can I say more?" he asked.

Reki laughed a little, a wet sort of sound. "What?"

"Can I say more things I like?"

“About—me?”

Langa nodded, and Reki huffed another laugh, scrunching up his face, his cheeks pushing up into a wobbly smile even as tears swelled up between his clumpy eyelashes. “Ah—ah, I won’t— *stop* you.”

Langa tightened his hands around Reki’s waist. *Finally,* he thought, finally he would be able to share the things he had wanted to say for so long. “I like all the different colored clothes you have,” he said. “And how you wear them all together. Every day there’s a new combination.” Reki laughed again, rubbing the tears from his eyes, and Langa wanted to kiss them away, but instead he just smoothed his thumbs over Reki’s arms, because this was about Reki, about mending the hole in his heart from all the people who had told him he wasn’t good enough. “And I like how you use all these funny words instead of swearing. Because of your little sisters.”

“They’re not funny,” said Reki, laughing again, his eyes drier now, and he kicked at Langa’s ankles, sloshing the water up onto Langa’s shins. Langa didn’t care; he only cared about the brightness of Reki’s squinted-up eyes. “I can swear if I want to! I just think it’s uncool.”

“Uh-huh,” said Langa, even though he knew the truth, which was that Reki didn’t want to be a bad influence on his baby sisters, and also because in some ways Reki still loved the things from his own childhood, monster truck movies and bandaids with cartoons on them and saying things like *crap* and *freaking*. “And also I like the things you doodle on my notebooks. Sometimes I keep them. The drawings.”

Reki huffed out another laugh, scrubbing at his face, his foot bumping against Langa’s in the cold water. “You don’t have to do that,” he said. “I know they’re kinda shitty.”

“No,” said Langa. “None of them are shitty.”

Reki laughed again, and god, his face was so flushed and pretty and Langa wanted to compliment again and again, until he ran out of things to say, but he knew deep down that he would probably never run out. Sometimes Langa had a hard time talking, but he never had a hard time talking about *Reki.* “You’re a good guy, Langa,” Reki said, squeezing his arms. His tank top ruffled in the wind, his hair whipping around his face, his hands warm against Langa’s elbows. “The best.”

His voice was so heavy with affection that Langa ached. It felt like a confession, even though Langa knew in his heart that it wasn't, it wasn't, it wasn't but god he wanted it to be.

"Can we jump?" he asked. His feet were growing cold; he could feel his toes wrinkling. "You never showed me how."

"Ah," said Reki, squeezing his arms one more time before letting go. "Yeah! Of course." He lined himself up next to Langa, tangling their fingers together, watching their feet as the waves rolled over their ankles. "Okay, c'mere, let's go a little deeper."

Langa waded alongside him until the water rose halfway up their shins. The sun had set completely by now, and the air that blew through them made Langa shiver, but Reki's hand was warm and tight in his own hand and Langa would have followed him anywhere. A larger wave rolled in and Reki leapt in the water, splashing the bottoms of Langa's shorts, laughing, and Langa could feel a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"You got me wet," he said.

"C'mon!" Reki said, pulling on his arm. "You have to jump too!"

Another wave crested in front of them and Langa jumped when Reki did, still grinning, the sand sliding away from under his feet, the water leaping up and soaking the hems of his shorts, but Langa laughed when Reki did, because it felt like if he didn't laugh, he was going to cry, from all the emotion overflowing in his chest. But he was with Reki and he was laughing, and when the next wave came rolling in, they jumped again and they jumped again and they jumped again and Langa laughed until his chest ached, until his throat burned, and then

he slipped

and then he was falling, and then he was on his ass in the water, another wave catching him around the chest, water splashing up into his mouth, his clothes soaked, and Reki gasped

around a laugh, still hanging onto Langa's arm. "Dude!" Reki said, and Langa groaned, lifting his wet arms out of the water, and Reki started laughing again when he saw that Langa was okay, holding his stomach with his free hand, and Langa splashed water up onto Reki's tank top with all the strength he had.

"Stop!" yelped Reki, and when he tried to jump over the next wave, Langa pulled hard on his arm and Reki came toppling down into the water, too, his hands catching on Langa's shoulders, his legs slipping out from under him, sending another wave of water up to Langa's neck, and Langa was laughing harder, grabbing onto Reki's torso in the water as Reki spluttered. "A—asshole!"

"That's not fair," gasped Langa, laughing even as Reki splashed water up onto his face, squeezing his eyes shut against the salt. "You're not allowed to swear!"

"I'll swear if I freakin' want—"

"See!"

"Stop!" Reki splashed him again, but then he started laughing, too, his body shaking under Langa's hands, his forehead bumping against Langa's for a moment as he struggled to get his knees under himself. The water was so cold, everything was cold but the moment felt so vibrant and alive and Langa laughed because he could feel so many things, he could feel the salty burst of each wave, he could feel the rough sand moving beneath him, he could feel the crisp air on his face, in his damp hair. He could feel so many things and god, god, god when was the last time he had *felt* like this?

I love you, he wanted to gasp, because *god* it was true, but Reki was splashing him again and then Langa had to splash back and everything was so *good* and alive and god he didn't want to ruin the moment for anything.

Reki stayed with his knees pressed to Langa's, his body bumping against Langa's in so many places, laughing until his body started to shiver under Langa's hands. Before Langa had a chance to say anything, Reki wiped his eyes and gasped through a laugh, "You're cold, man! You're cold, we should get out."

“You’re the one who’s cold,” Langa said, but Reki smacked his arm, water splashing up onto Langa’s neck, and when Langa made a face, Reki squeezed him and said,

“Sorry sorry sorry!” and scrambled to his feet, pulling Langa with him. Langa wobbled a little in the sand and Reki caught him briefly around the waist, and Langa had to swallow back the sudden urge to grab him and kiss him right there, knee-deep in the ocean, with Reki’s hand on the curve of his waist and *god* Langa wanted to kiss him. But then he shivered, violently, in the sudden gust of cold wind that brought another wave splashing against their bare legs, and Reki grabbed his hand and began tugging him toward shore.

“If we get sick,” Langa said, tripping after him, trying to stop his teeth from chattering “I’m going to tell my mom it was your fault.”

“It was *your* fault!” Reki said, laughing, his face tilting briefly toward the night sky, and Langa’s heart began to thunder against his ribs, just as if he *had* kissed him. Reki’s laugh was so loud and perfect in the open air and his silhouette was so crisp and bright in the moonlight, and god, god Langa had never felt so *alive.*

Rain blew in after them, and it pattered against the windows of their hotel room, but no storm could drown out the most beautiful sound in the world:

Reki was singing in the shower.

And Langa was suffering.

He lay on his back on the bed, his face flushed warm, burning with the urge to walk over to the bathroom door, where he could hear Reki’s shower running. They had been shivering when they checked into the hotel, their soaked clothes dripping onto the floor, and they had run barefoot all the way up to their room in the freezing air conditioning. Reki had insisted that Langa take the first shower, and so he had, soaking the hot water into his skin until he couldn’t take it anymore, but now he just had to *lay* here, a towel wrapped clumsily around his hair, listening to Reki *sing.*

It wasn't even—Langa wasn't even sure it was a coherent song. It didn't matter. Reki's voice was scratchy and slightly off-tune and he kept trying to do these notes too low for his vocal range, and whenever he did, the notes vibrated so perfectly with the sound of falling water, and they made Langa's brain screech, almost desperate with want. He balled up his hands on the comforter, listening to Reki's voice crack on a word that sounded like *baby,* and tried not to think about Reki climbing on top of him on the bed, laying his head down on Langa's chest and singing those scratchy words directly into Langa's pounding heart.

God. He rubbed at his face. It was like, it was like every day Langa discovered something new about Reki, and it wasn't fair, because the things were always *devastating,* somehow, because of how much they made Langa's chest ache. How had he never asked Reki to sing for him before? Could Langa ask him to do it again? Every day? At his wedding, someday?

The water shut off, and Langa almost groaned when Reki's mumbling voice died away, because god, he wanted to listen to Reki sing forever. But then he heard the sound of bottles clattered onto the shower floor and sat up, remembering that now maybe he would be able to touch Reki again. They had held each other's hands for hours and hours. Langa's palms already ached from the loss of it.

He scrambled off the bed and padded across the carpet to the bathroom, and just as he was about to knock, Reki opened the door, steam pouring out around him. Langa blinked, partly because of the steam but mostly because Reki's face was so rosy and warm and bright, a towel around his shoulders, his hair dripping down his neck. Langa swallowed. Reki was dressed in just an oversized t-shirt and his boxers, and he looked so clean and soft and huggable, and god, it was unfair, Langa just wanted to hug him *so badly.*

"I heard," Langa began, and then stopped himself, because oh what if Reki was self-conscious about his singing, but it was too late to take the words back, so shamefacedly he admitted, "I heard you singing."

"Ah," Reki said, laughing a little, rubbing the towel over his wet hair, his frizzy little flyaways curling up. "Sorry about that. I sorta zoned out."

"It's okay," said Langa, shuffling his feet. Somehow he felt sort of shy, even though there was no reason to, it was just that Reki looked so soft and pretty after his shower and Langa didn't

know what to do with all his feelings. He wanted to reach out and touch, he wanted to wrap his fingers in the front of Reki's t-shirt, but he was too embarrassed, so he just said, "You have a...a nice voice, I think."

"You think?" Reki said, teasing, reaching out with his foot to kick lightly at Langa's ankle, and Langa jumped a little, flushing. God, there was no reason to feel shy! But, but the hotel room was just so quiet and softly-lit, and Langa felt a bit embarrassed in his bare feet, in the cold air conditioning, standing here in front of Reki with his hair wrapped in a towel.

"You do," Langa said, and cleared his throat, balling up his hands in the hem of his own t-shirt, which was worn and old from how often he slept in it. "I didn't know you could sing."

"Ah, I can't really," said Reki, and then, before Langa could argue, he bounced on the balls of his feet and gestured to Langa's towel hat. "Do you wanna dry your hair? They have a blowdryer in here, I can help you."

"Ah," said Langa, a bit incoherent, because the collar of Reki's shirt had slipped off one of his shoulders and Langa could see the fresh tanline burned there, from his tank top. He tried to shake himself, letting go of the hem of his shirt. "Okay. I—thank you."

"Of course, man," said Reki, and then he took Langa by the arm, and Langa swallowed because of how warm his palm was, how smooth his skin felt without the bandaid he had been wearing all day. Clumsily Langa followed him into the tiny bathroom, their bodies bumping together as he watched Reki plug in the blow dryer. They had had so many sleepovers, but somehow they had never shared a bathroom like this, and Langa felt warm and shy and a little fragile with the intimacy of it. Reki squeezed his shoulder through his thin sleep shirt and Langa barely suppressed a shudder at the touch.

"Did you put in the conditioner?" Reki asked. "That's very important."

Langa swallowed, and oh, Reki had remembered about the conditioner. Langa had taught him about that, and Reki had remembered, even though the girls had made fun of him for it at that horrible mixer. Langa nodded. "Yeah," he said, and then hesitated. "Did you?"

Reki wrinkled his nose. “Yeah,” he said. “I always use it now. Don’t make fun of me!” Quickly he hopped up onto the sink, scooting backward, and Langa tried not to think about Reki lathering the conditioner into his hair after every shower, humming to himself, maybe even thinking about Langa. Reki touched his shoulders, and Langa jumped again, flushing anew, and Reki made an amused sort of sound in his throat, carefully turning Langa around.

Langa allowed himself to be maneuvered, his mouth feeling drier than before as Reki parted his legs, his knees bumping against Langa’s sides. Reki was so close that Langa could feel the hair on his shins, rubbed soft and fluffy from the hotel towels, and the way Reki fumbled with the towel wrapped around his head. Langa squeezed his eyes shut as the towel fell away and Reki’s hands came back to touch him, smoothing the hair carefully off his face, the pads of his fingers gentle and damp.

“Did you hear the storm?” Reki asked. “I’m super glad we didn’t try to go home tonight, y’know? The trains would probably be all backed up.”

Langa nodded. He was glad, too, not because of the trains, but because he had been dreaming about this night for so long, a chance to hold Reki as they slept between smooth, fresh sheets, a chance to wake up smelling the same and brushing their teeth in the same bathroom, a chance to experience something so new and exciting together.

“I like the rain,” Langa said, and Reki made a humming sound of agreement, one of his ankles bumping against Langa’s hip, and Langa swallowed. “It’s...it’s nice.”

“That’s very you,” said Reki, and Langa could hear a smile in his voice, and he flushed a little, even though he didn’t know exactly what Reki meant. Then Reki turned on the blowdryer, and Langa kept his eyes closed so he could try to memorize the feeling of Reki’s fingers carding through his hair, tilting his head gently one way and the other as he moved the blowdryer around. His knees pressed against Langa’s sides, and Langa felt warm on either side, and secure, as if Reki was holding him.

Something swelled up in his throat, and he had to fight to choke it back down, because, god, nobody had ever made him feel cherished the way Reki did. He touched Langa so carefully, stroking over his scalp, lifting the damp hair off of his neck. Nobody had ever treated Langa as if he was precious, and he had never known before how much he needed somebody to.

“Your hair’s so soft,” Reki mumbled admiringly, tilting Langa’s head to the side, and Langa swallowed again, squinting his eyes open again. He could see the sunburn on the tops of Reki’s swinging feet, the flip-flop tanlines, and the feeling swelled up in his throat again. Reki was so adorable. Reki was so kind, so sweet, so precious, god he was precious, and Langa wanted to make him feel cherished, too.

Finally Reki turned off the blowdryer, ruffling Langa’s hair with both hands, and Langa pressed his hands to his thighs, because it felt so good, Reki’s hands in his hair, Reki’s thumbs smoothing against the nape of his neck, Reki’s legs against his sides. “Thank you,” Langa managed, and Reki, *god,* Reki squeezed him with his knees and Langa nearly let out a whimper.

“Any time, man,” Reki said, his hands still tangled in Langa’s hair, and Langa swallowed, his face so so so warm, because god it sounded like Reki meant it, as if he would come over and help Langa wash his hair anytime Langa wanted. Finally Reki pulled his hands away, clearing his throat. “Can you help with mine? I mean, you don’t have to sit up here, you’re tall enough, but I mean, I mean only if you want, like, you don’t have to, I don’t mean—”

“I want to,” said Langa quickly, turning around, and Reki met his eyes, his voice trailing away, and Langa’s heart stuttered in his chest. God. Reki’s cheeks were so pink from the shower, his hair messy, his pajama shirt rumpled and his posture slouchy and adorable and god, he was so precious, he was so lovable and Langa wanted to hug him so badly. He gazed up at Reki, a little helpless, because for some reason he didn’t know how to say how much he wanted to snuggle against Reki’s body and let Reki wrap his arms and legs around him, how much he wanted to kiss Reki so sweetly, how much he wanted to whimper against his beautiful mouth, how much he wanted Reki to hold him.

Reki swallowed, his throat bobbing, and slid down onto the floor. He didn’t take his eyes off Langa’s, and Langa had to swallow, too, because now Reki was standing so close that Langa could see the hairs on his eyebrows that stood up funny, the ones Langa had always wanted to kiss. God. His heart was throbbing against his chest. He should have kissed Reki in the ocean, when he had a chance, because now he wasn’t sure he’d ever have the nerve. How had he ever gotten up the courage, before, to kiss someone so pretty?

Langa didn’t know. He didn’t have the words to explain, so instead he picked up the blowdryer, carefully. “Tell me if it’s too hot,” he said, and Reki cleared his throat and nodded, turning around.

He turned on the blowdryer, angling it at the back of Reki's head, and then Langa was allowed to touch his hair, too, the way Reki had touched him, smoothing out the unruly curls, the frizzy ends. Instead of coming down in a peak at the nape of his neck, Reki's hair curled into a point under one of his ears, and Langa wanted to kiss it, he wanted to kiss it so badly, but he made himself focus. Reki's hair went brittle and dry in his fingers, and when the collar of his sleep shirt slipped down his back, Langa could see the freckles blooming on his shoulders, and he had to swallow again, and again, to stop himself from touching.

He knew Reki's skin would feel so warm under his fingers.

"Thank you," said Reki, when Langa finally turned off the blowdryer and ran his hands one last time over Reki's frizzy hair, fluffing it up like a cloud without his headband to hold it in place. Langa's face was warm, but when Reki turned around, he gave Langa a soft smile, and the nerves in Langa's stomach melted away. God. He wanted to kiss Reki's smile. "Dude, you're so sunburned."

He reached up and thumbed at Langa's cheek, and Langa could feel himself flushing again, no matter how much he tried to force it down. "You are, too," he managed. "Yours is worse."

Reki made a face and then laughed a little. "Yeah, but I'm used to it," he said. "This happens to me every summer, but you've got, like, delicate skin. You're the prince, remember?" He rubbed Langa's cheek again, tilting his head. "Ah, I feel like I ruined you."

His hand fell away, and Langa swallowed again. His chest shouldn't burn this way, because he knew Reki was probably worried about being a bad influence on him, too, the way he had been worried about people laughing at Langa's nail polish. But Langa liked it anyway. He liked the thought of Reki leaving a mark on him, somehow, the way gravel embedded itself in his palms when he skidded on the concrete after a bad skating fall. Reki made him feel alive, more real, even in the gritty, messy ways.

"You didn't," Langa said, and then, because he probably sounded too vulnerable, he added, "I'm the one who kept forgetting the sunscreen."

Reki laughed again, tucking his hair back, bobbing on the balls of his feet. "Yeah, okay. It's your fault."

Langa flushed. “I take it back.”

“Too late!” Reki punched Langa’s shoulder, lightly, so lightly, his fist lingering there, and Langa made a face at him to hide the way his heart was hammering. “I’m serious, man, you don’t want that to peel. It’ll hurt like hell. C’mere, my mom gave me something before he left.”

He tugged Langa out of the bathroom, under the blasting air conditioning, and rooted around in their overflowing bags, coming up with a small green bottle and showing it to Langa. Langa tried to read the label aloud, but the words were unfamiliar, and Reki laughed a little, pushing gently on his chest until Langa fell onto the bed.

“It’s aloe vera,” Reki said. “It’ll help with the burn. Hang on.” He scrambled onto the bed beside Langa, the mattress dipping, and then uncapped the bottle, squeezing it into his palm. “Can I put it on your face?”

Langa’s mouth felt dry. Reki wanted to touch his face? “Uh—” He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Go ahead.”

“Cool,” said Reki, poking his tongue into his cheek, frowning a little in concentration as he reached out, smoothing his fingers over Langa’s cheek. Langa shivered a little, pulling his feet up onto the bed, because the lotion was cold but Reki’s fingers were gentle, god the way he touched Langa was so gentle. Carefully Reki spread the aloe vera across Langa’s nose and cheeks and even his forehead, where Langa hadn’t even realized he was sunburned, and then Reki dropped his eyes to Langa’s collar, swallowing.

“What?” asked Langa, feeling his body go even warmer, because god, whenever Reki looked at him that way—eyes glued to Langa’s skin, color high in his cheeks, an intense expression on his face—god, it made Langa want to die, and it also made him want to grab Reki and beg him to look at him some more.

“You’re sunburned here, too,” Reki said, tracing the tanline across Langa’s throat, and Langa nearly choked at the way Reki’s fingernail scraped against his skin. “And probably…” Reki hesitated. “Probably on your stomach, a little, too? I noticed when we were on the Ferris wheel.”

“Oh.” Langa’s throat was so, so dry. Reki was going to touch him—there? “Okay.”

“Do you want to do it yourself?” Reki asked, offering the bottle, but Langa was shaking his head hastily before he fully processed the action.

“No,” he said, and, ah, this was embarrassing, wasn’t it? He could feel his face flushing all over again. “I mean, uh, do you—do you mind?”

“I don’t mind,” said Reki, and god, his face looked flushed, too, and Langa didn’t know if it was the sunburn or the sound of his own heartbeat pulsing through the room, because surely Reki must feel that, too. “Okay. Um. Hang on.” Reki pulled his legs up, crossing them underneath him, and reached to tug Langa’s collar away from his neck. “Tell me if it hurts, okay?”

Langa nodded, because now he wasn’t sure he could speak, and Reki squeezed the aloe vera onto his fingers again and touched Langa’s neck carefully. Langa swallowed, his throat bobbing against Reki’s fingers, and Reki made a hoarse sound in his throat, and Langa felt like his face going to burn off. But he didn’t say anything, and Reki just cleared his throat, the flush high on his face, working quickly and carefully. When he took his hands away, Langa had to choke back a whine, because he wanted Reki to touch him again, he wanted Reki’s arms wrapped around him and Reki’s chin buried in his shoulder, he wanted and he wanted and he *wanted* .

But then Reki hiked up the sleeves of Langa’s t-shirt, spreading the aloe vera over his burning shoulders, and Langa had to bite the inside of his mouth again, because god, Reki’s hands felt so good. Nobody had ever touched him so gently, so softly, in these simple ways that shouldn’t feel good but did, somehow, because it was Reki. It was like Langa’s body was burning with nerve endings that he had never known existed, and he shifted on the bed, wanting to press closer to Reki’s hands but not sure how.

“Okay,” said Reki, and then cleared his throat again, busying himself with the bottle, squeezing it into his hands again. “Can you—lift up your shirt? I won’t look, I promise, I mean I won’t look more than I need to, I mean, I just mean, hah—”

Langa thought he was going to die, but he managed to swallow down the worst of the blush and nod. “It’s okay,” he said, and then, because he couldn’t help himself, he said, “You can—look. I mean. It’s okay to look.”

Reki cleared his throat again, and god, his ears looked so red, and Langa swallowed again, flushing, because what if Reki was blushing that way because of him? No, it was too much to hope for, it made his body burn too much, he would never survive if he thought about Reki getting flustered over looking at Langa’s stomach. Hesitantly Langa lifted the hem of his t-shirt, too afraid to look down and see if he really *was* sunburned.

“Is it—bad?” he asked, and Reki glanced at him and then back at his hands, clearing his throat *again.*

“No,” Reki said, his voice scratchy. “It’s not—it’s not as bad as I thought. Like, it probably won’t peel.” He rubbed at his face with the back of his hand, shifting on the bed, one of his knees beginning to bounce in the way it did when he was nervous, and Langa swallowed again.

“Okay,” he said, and then, because Reki seemed to need the reassurance, he added, “I’m ready.”

“Ah.” Reki shook himself a little. “Okay!” His voice cracked a little on the word, and Langa’s neck flushed, and then—and then Reki put his hands on Langa’s stomach, both of them at once, and Langa’s stomach jumped, and Reki snatched his hands away. For a moment both of them just breathed heavily into the silence, and then Langa managed,

“Sorry, I was just—I was just surprised,”

and Reki exclaimed, “Sorry! Okay,” and reached for Langa’s torso again. This time his hands were more hesitant, but Langa still had to suppress a shudder, because, god, the way Reki’s fingers spread out, skating over the bottom of his ribs, made him want to shiver all over.

“The sunburn’s not bad,” Reki repeated, his voice a little strained, swiping his fingers over the bones of Langa’s hips and Langa tried to swallow, tried not to make any embarrassing

noises. Reki hesitated again, and then traced the edges of Langa's scar, and Langa tried to catch his breath, because he was sure now that his chest was heaving, but Reki just glanced up at his face and asked, "When'd you get surgery?"

"Ah—" Langa knew his face was red. "I, ah. It was a couple of years ago. When I was a freshman."

Reki nodded, clearing his throat, the tips of his ears still flushed. "Was it scary?"

"I—I guess so." It had been an inconvenience more than anything, time off of snowboarding, time away from school. "Ah—when did you get yours?"

Reki glanced at himself, and finally he took his hands off Langa's stomach, and Langa had to swallow heavily, because he wanted to grab Reki's wrists and place his hands back on his skin and, and, and. "It was when I was little," Reki said. "I barely even remember being sick, but my mom said I was such a pain in the butt." He grinned a little, like was remembering, tugging the hem of his shirt up so that Langa caught a glimpse of the faded, puckered scar there, and he swallowed. "But it was kinda exciting to me. I don't know. I got all these balloons and lollipops at the hospital, and I was just like, all proud that I got to be the center of attention for once."

Langa was so flushed and embarrassed, but he could still feel himself smiling, thinking about baby Reki, all puffed up and proud of himself for surviving surgery, fists clasped around way too many *Get Well Soon* balloons. "That's kind of funny," he said.

"Yeah," said Reki. "I've always been a hoot!"

Langa laughed, and then Reki laughed too, nudging his ankle against Langa on the bed. Reki's face was still rosy and flushed, and he grabbed the aloe vera off the comforter, offering it to Langa again, saying,

"Can you put it on me?"

and Langa choked on the laugh, his face heating up all over again, but he nodded and took the bottle. Reki closed his eyes, the ghost of a smile still lingering around his mouth, and Langa had to swallow several times while he fumbled to get the bottle open. Reki was sitting there so patiently, his knee still bouncing, waiting for Langa to touch him, like he trusted Langa to take care of him, and Langa—Langa wanted to do a good job of it. He carefully touched Reki's face with the gel, and Reki scrunched up his cheeks immediately.

"Cold," he complained, and Langa swallowed.

"Don't be a baby," he said, but there was no bite to it, because really he thought it would be okay if Reki was a baby sometimes, if sometimes Reki allowed Langa to take care of him the way he took care of Langa. Langa tried to hold his hands steady as he smoothed the aloe vera over Reki's rough, textured skin, being extra gentle on his nose, where the peeling edges of the skin looked raw and red. "Does it hurt?"

"Nah," said Reki, keeping his eyes screwed shut, and Langa swallowed, taking his hands away. He couldn't resist looking at Reki's mouth, even though he felt a little guilty, because for once he knew Reki wouldn't catch him staring, and because, because, because. Because the corners of Reki's mouth were dimpled and deep, and his lips were flushed and full, the tiniest dent in the middle of his bottom lip, and god, Langa wanted to touch his tongue to that dent. He shifted on the mattress, hot and embarrassed, and quickly fumbled to squeeze the bottle into his hands again so he could work on Reki's arms.

When he finished, Reki finally opened his eyes again, and Langa's chest felt sort of stifled and hot with how pretty Reki's eyes looked—god, did *every* part of Reki have to be pretty? God, Langa even liked the flip-flop tanline on Reki's feet, he was absolutely gone for him, and he couldn't think of what to say, but luckily Reki said, "Thanks, man," and grabbed the bottle, scrambling off the bed to tuck it back into the bags.

Langa tried not to stare at him, at the strong lines of his thighs below the hem of his boxers. The moment felt heavy somehow, with anticipation maybe, because what were they supposed to do now? Would Reki just want to go to sleep? And, oh, Langa squeezed his hands between his legs, because he had wanted so badly to be able to kiss, even just a little, he just wanted the feeling of Reki's warm face cradled in his palms, he just wanted the soft press of Reki's mouth against his own. He wished that he had won the competition. He imagined clearing his throat and asking Reki to kiss him, and his chest ached so much with longing that he thought he might cry. How was he supposed to lie next to Reki in the hotel bed and *not* kiss him? His hands already ached with the effort of holding back. Maybe Reki thought the photo booth kissing had been enough for one day, but maybe he would agree to just *one* more kiss, just a

quick one, because Langa's chest was starting to burn with how much he wanted it, please just *one* kiss, please.

Reki turned around, kicking the bags up against the TV stand. "What d'you wanna do now?"

Langa swallowed, hoping his face didn't betray how much he wanted to say, *come here, please, come here and put your arms around me and let me kiss your mouth, please just once.* "Did you really want to order room service?" Langa asked, and Reki made a face, scratching at his elbow.

"I don't know," he said. "I said that because I—ugh. Ugh, I don't know! I thought maybe it would be romantic, y'know? Like isn't that what you're supposed to do when you're at a hotel with somebody, like, order fancy food and champagne and eat it in bed?"

"We're too young to order champagne," said Langa, who had no idea how much that would even cost, probably way too much for them, and Reki made another face.

"I *know* that!" he said. "Ugh. See? My romantic plan is falling apart, and it was probably crap to begin with anyway." He slumped back down on the bed, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"It wasn't crap," Langa tried, and Reki glanced at him, poking his tongue in between his teeth again, and Langa's stomach squirmed as he tried not to look.

"Well," said Reki, and then he sighed, rubbing at the back of his neck, straightening his shoulders. "What do you think...I mean, what do you think would be, like, the romantic thing to do?"

Langa's stomach squirmed again, and he pressed his hands even more tightly between his legs. God. Why was Reki asking that? What would he say if Langa said kissing? Technically that would be the most romantic thing to do, right, touch each other's flushed faces and kiss until they couldn't breathe, until they toppled onto the comforter together, and god, what if Reki *wanted* Langa to say that?

It was too much to think about—that Reki might *like* the kissing, that he might want it, too. Langa swallowed. “You mean like…if you were with a girl?”

Reki’s cheeks scrunched up. “I—I guess?”

Langa’s heart was pounding in his chest, in the flush on his cheeks. What if he...what if he asked for what he really wanted? The worst Reki could do was laugh awkwardly and shove at his shoulders, and then Langa could always play it off like he just meant it hypothetically, even though he knew how much his stomach would burn with the humiliation of being rejected. His tongue was so clumsy he thought he would never be able to say it, but then his mouth was opening and he heard himself say, “Maybe she would want to...to sit in your lap?”

Reki blinked, his eyes going big, and for a moment he just looked at Langa, taking several deep breaths as Langa squeezed his palms together, his neck burning, thinking *god please don’t laugh, please, please just let me sit in your lap, please I just want you to hold me.* Reki swallowed.

“You wanna—” He seemed to be having a hard time working his mouth around the words. “I mean, you’d try that?”

Langa nodded, the flush rising on his face, and he tried to keep his voice level when he said, “Can I? I mean—” and, god, his voice cracked, and he winced, flushing even hotter. “I mean, should—should I?”

Reki’s eyes were still huge. Maybe nobody had ever sat in his lap before, and Langa swallowed heavily, because of course nobody ever had. Langa wanted to, very badly. “Okay,” said Reki, and his voice cracked, too, and Langa had to rub his hands against his shorts, because they were so sweaty, and Reki’s face was so flushed with color and it was so hard not to think that maybe he wanted this, too, maybe he wanted to hold Langa around the waist and bury his face in Langa’s neck, breathing him in, and god, god, god.

Langa cleared his throat. “Maybe you should—sit against the pillows?”

Reki glanced at the top of the bed, where nearly a dozen fluffy pillows were piled against the headboard, and then he nodded, scrambling quickly across the mattress. His t-shirt slipped down over his collarbones again, and when he settled against the pillows, his hair fluffy around his face, he looked so good that Langa had to swallow again. God. It should be illegal for somebody to look the way Reki did, skin raw and bright and eyebrows wild, his hands twitching against the comforter, and to be so unaware of it. Reki looked at him, flushed and expectantly and a bit nervous, as if he had no idea how badly Langa wanted to bury his face in Reki's chest and hold onto him forever, and Langa quickly shuffled across the mattress to kneel in front of him.

God. He glanced down at Reki's thighs, pale and scraped up above the tanline around his knees, and then hastily looked at his face. Was Reki really going to allow Langa to be so—so close to him? They would be so much closer than ever before. But Reki reached out his hands, and Langa's heart thumped, and carefully he swung one leg over Reki's knees and settled heavily on top of his thighs.

Langa nearly whimpered when Reki's arms wrapped around his waist, pulling just the smallest bit closer. God—god, it felt so much better than he had ever imagined, the firmness of Reki's legs underneath him, the warmth of Reki's chest only a breath away from his own, the way Langa's knees were squished between pillows and Reki's hips. They were pressed together in so many places, and Langa wanted to cuddle even closer, but he swallowed, pressing his hands to the front of Reki's chest so that he could feel Reki's heartbeat. Reki's t-shirt was soft, and his stomach jumped a little, against Langa's body, and Langa tried to breathe, but he couldn't, because his heart was thundering too loudly, and his face was so flushed and warm and god, god his own shirt was so tight around his chest.

"What—" Reki cleared his throat, sort of strangled. His hands tightened around Langa's waist, and Langa managed not to whimper. "What now?"

"Maybe," Langa tried, with no real idea where he was going with the thought, except that god he wanted to kiss Reki's face, his adorable red cheeks, and maybe his sweet peeling nose or god, his mouth, he wanted to kiss flush against Reki's mouth just to hear the soft, muffled sound Reki might make, he wanted Reki to cuddle his face into Langa's shoulder, warm and blushing. And then he was thinking about Reki blushing and he had another idea, an even better idea and before he could stop himself the words were tumbling out. "Maybe I could say— nice things about you."

Reki stared up at him, his mouth parted just the smallest bit, and Langa could feel his chest rising and falling heavily. “Nice things like—like what?”

God, there were so many, and Langa took a deep breath, bracing his hands against Reki’s chest, feeling the fabric rumbling under his palms. Reki’s eyes were so big, and Langa wanted to say that the way Reki’s eyes shone golden in the sunlight and melted into brown at nighttime was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, but then his eyes dropped to Reki’s mouth, the way his tongue pushed against his bottom lips and Langa’s stomach went hot, because, oh, god, would he finally be allowed to say it? He had thought about Reki’s mouth for months, even before he had gotten the chance to kiss it, and now, god, he melted every time he dreamed about kissing it again, and his voice tripped over itself to say, “Maybe, ah—that you have a pretty mouth?”

Reki’s breathing was labored against him, his neck stained red. “Really?” he asked, and his voice cracked, and Langa nodded, he nodded because god he wanted so badly for Reki to believe it, that he was beautiful, that he had the sweetest mouth in the world, that it made the most beautiful sounds and sang so wonderfully and talked in the most perfectly scratchy voice and god, Langa could stare at it forever and die happily. Reki reached for his own face, almost unconsciously, and his fingers brushed the dry skin of his mouth, as if he had never thought about it before, and Langa tried not to squirm in his lap because suddenly *he* wanted to touch Reki’s mouth, too, more than anything.

“It’s nice,” Langa managed, and Reki swallowed.

“Yours—too,” he said, his voice hoarse and strangled, and then, god, then he reached up and touched Langa’s mouth, too, and Langa parted his lips instinctively, trying not to whimper. The pads of Reki’s fingers felt so good, just the right amount of pressure, and Langa wanted to kiss them clumsily, he wanted to kiss *Reki.* He was breathing so heavily, and he could feel that Reki was, too, and god, god Langa *needed* to kiss him or he was pretty sure he was going to die.

And then Reki mumbled, “And—and we should kiss?” and Langa’s chest throbbed hard against his ribs.

He was nodding, so fast, before he could even realize it. “Yeah,” he said, his heart pounding *yes yes please yes I love you,* “Yeah, if you—if you want to.”

Reki's arms tightened around his waist, and Langa's breath stuck in his throat, his chest burning, at the way Reki's eyes were glued to his mouth. "I want to," Reki said, and his voice cracked on the words, and he let his hand fall away from Langa's mouth, and Langa nearly whined at the loss of touch before Reki surged up and their noses bumped, clumsy, Reki's mouth missing his and kissing the corner of his lips instead.

Langa squeezed his eyes closed. It made his stomach all squirmy and hot, Reki missing his mouth, like he was so eager and, and, and god Langa wanted to kiss him so much, so they fumbled against each other and finally, finally their lips found each other and Reki groaned, muffled, against him and pulled Langa even closer.

Langa's hands scrabbled at Reki's shoulders, trying to hold on, trying to hold himself together enough to kiss back because, because god, Reki's mouth was so warm, and he felt so good, and Langa's head was going fuzzy with the way Reki tilted his head and pressed in like he couldn't get enough, but before his mind completely dissolved, Langa remembered the dent in Reki's bottom lip that he had wanted so badly to kiss. He pulled away just a little, breathing hard, and Reki gave a muffled groan, trying to chase his mouth.

Langa's chest stuttered, because god, Reki's eyes were heavy-lidded and he looked so flushed all the way down to his loose collar, god, he looked so pretty, so soft and warm and good.

"Langa," Reki said, half a groan and half a whine, and Langa's heart stuttered again, because of the way Reki kept trying to chase his mouth, his hands pressing flat against Langa's back to try and haul him in. With some difficulty Langa managed to get his hand to Reki's chin, touching his thumb to the center of Reki's bottom lip, and Reki stopped squirming immediately, his eyes blown wide, his mouth parting easily, and Langa swallowed hard. Reki's mouth was softer, now, from the kissing, and Langa could feel the tiny dent under his thumb and he thought he was going to cry, god, Reki was going to be the death of him.

"Sorry," Langa mumbled, even though he wasn't really sorry, pulling away had been worth it to see Reki's wild eyes, Reki's hair so messy around his face, Reki's cheeks stained so red it was like the color would never fade away. Langa leaned in again, and immediately Reki surged up again, pressing their mouths together, and Langa whimpered at the way Reki touched his tongue to Langa's lips, even though Langa had been about to lick at that dent the way he had wanted to earlier, and, and, and, god. He whined into Reki's mouth when Reki tilted their heads, sliding his tongue over Langa's bottom lip, and Langa's heart was pounding

so hard against his chest that it hurt, but he didn't want to stop, god, he didn't want to stop for anything.

He could feel Reki panting against him, his arms snug around Langa's waist, and god Langa felt so *good* and *held* and *safe,* like nothing could ever hurt him as long as he was perched in Reki's lap, making out with him until their mouths were sore. He clung tightly to Reki's shoulders, and when Reki shifted against him, his t-shirt slipped down his arm and Langa nearly choked when his hand pressed to the warm skin there, where Reki's sleeve should be, where Langa had never touched him before, and god, *god.*

He didn't mean to, but he bumped his teeth against Reki's mouth, and Reki made this rasping sound against him, his hands fumbling on Langa's waist. Langa managed to pull away, gasping against Reki's mouth so he could say, "You—do you like—"

Reki groaned, embarrassed, and Langa swallowed, kissing his mouth again, but he sort of wanted to know about the teeth thing, so maybe he could try more, so he made himself pull away again, ignoring Reki's whine.

"Can I do it again?" he asked, and Reki screwed up his eyes, nodding, his face stained *so red* and god Langa was going to lose his mind. He squeezed his own eyes shut as he ducked down again, pressing his teeth gently to Reki's bottom lip, and Reki made the rasping sound again. Langa pressed his fingers into Reki's shoulders, holding on for dear life because *god* Jesus fuck, and then tugged on his lip with his teeth, as carefully as he could and the *sound* Reki made, god it made Langa feel like his body was on fire.

He let go, kissing the spot, soothing it with his tongue, and Reki's chest was heaving, and god, he must like this, right? The kissing. He must like it, maybe even as much as Langa did, and the thought made Langa's head spin, and he tilted his head and kissed Reki deeply. There was something swelling in his chest again. Reki had trusted him, Reki had let him try something new even though it embarrassed him, Reki was allowing Langa to be the first person to try all these things with him, and he was holding onto Langa so tightly, keeping him close, and Langa pressed their chests together for a moment, as if maybe all the feelings in his heart could bleed directly into Reki's, no words needed.

Finally Reki fell back against the pillows, panting, his hair all over the place, squeezing Langa's waist tightly through his thin t-shirt. "God," Reki rasped, eyes still screwed up. "Of course you're good at—"

Langa flushed hot, even though Reki mumbled the end of the sentence too incoherently to understand, and he reached up to move Reki's hair off his face. God, Reki's skin was hot to the touch, almost feverish, and Langa should probably climb off him, but he didn't want to, he wanted to fall asleep on top of Reki, their bodies snuggled together, and he swallowed hard. Reki lifted his head, looking sort of winded, flushed to the tips of his ears, and leaned in to kiss carefully at Langa's mouth again.

Langa let his eyes sink closed, breathing out, reveling in the softness of Reki's lips, the way he squeezed Langa's sides. God. He was so gentle, even after all of that, and he smelled so good, clean and warm like the hotel shower, and just a little sweaty. Langa wanted to breathe him in forever.

"D'you think this is romantic enough?" Reki mumbled against his mouth, his lips so soft that Langa could cry, and Langa nodded, the feeling swelling up in his chest again, in his throat.

"It's perfect," he said, and Reki made a sound against him, pressing his fingers into Langa's sides, as if his palms would burn right through the fabric, hot against Langa's bare skin.

"M'glad," he said, and kissed Langa again, and Langa felt like he was glowing with how perfect it had been, god, with how perfect Reki was. Reki's head fell back against the pillows again, and for a moment he just gazed up at Langa, something like wonder on his face, his hands cupping Langa's waist gently, and Langa swallowed, the shyness creeping in again, because what if he looked silly, sitting on Reki's lap? They were both so big, and Langa was at least a couple inches taller than him, but Reki just smiled, sort of soft, and Langa's heart squeezed in his chest. "Ah," Reki said, and then laughed a little. "Man, I feel like I'm overheating."

"Oh," said Langa, flushing, and hastily he scrambled off Reki's lap so that Reki could sit up. His chest ached a little, but he also felt sort of hopeful, like maybe they could do that again sometime. Reki hadn't minded, had he? He had seemed to like it, sort of, Langa sitting in his lap, Langa kissing him, even if it was just pretend, but maybe it wasn't *all* pretend, maybe there was some part of Reki that liked—

"Did we bring any water?" Reki asked, and Langa tried to shake himself back to reality, back to the yellow light of the hotel room.

“Ah—” He glanced at their beach bags. “I think we drank it all. But there’s probably an ice machine in the building? And we could just get water from the tap.”

Reki nodded, rubbing at his flushed face, and god, Langa’s heart throbbed at how cute he looked, so warm and flustered just from kissing Langa. Together they slid off the bed and glanced around for their shoes, before Reki said, “Let’s just go barefoot, who’s gonna catch us?”

Langa nodded, his chest still swollen with how much he loved him, god he loved him, even though his mom would scold them so much if she caught Langa wandering around a hotel with no shoes on. They found the ice bucket underneath the night stand and crept out of their room carefully, and Langa felt warm all over when he saw the *Do Not Disturb* sign hanging from their door handle. Had Reki put it there while he was in the shower? Langa definitely hadn’t.

“C’mon,” said Reki, looping their fingers together, and something tight in Langa’s chest relaxed when their palms pressed together. *Safe,* he thought, and he padded down the hall alongside Reki, each of them searching for a sign for the ice.

There were more people in the halls now, checking into different rooms,and a group of young kids ran by in swimsuits, but Langa stuck close to Reki and nobody tried to separate them. They found the ice machine at the end of a brightly-lit hallway, and Langa stood behind Reki as Reki tried to get it to work, muttering quietly to himself. Langa’s heart was so full, and he was already thinking about turning off the lights and burying themselves in blankets when they got back to the room, maybe kissing a little more in the dark. Langa leaned against Reki’s back, pressing his cheek to his hair, his arms loose around Reki’s waist, and Reki made the softest sound, shuffling against him, and Langa closed his eyes, content and happy and

and

and then, above the chattering of vacationers in the hallway behind them, he heard a voice calling out, a single word that made his whole body go stiff—

“Langa?”

Chapter End Notes

my heart was so full after the last chapter with all the wonderful art I was tagged in!!! please see:

their adorable carnival date
the sweetest cheek kiss
and the cutest photobooth strip.

I am always reblogging fanart so please follow me in case I forget anybody! and here is their Ferris wheel kiss!

and also: everyone has been so overwhelmingly sweet to me, but I put myself under a lot of pressure to meet expectations and produce content I am proud of. writing is stressful so please be kind!!! until next time~

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> hello friends! tw: this chapter contains a panic attack (I'm so sorry haha) involving Langa feeling like he can't breathe, like he is going to be sick, and like the world is spinning. this panic attack is worse than the others in this fic, and so if you are not in a good mindset for that, you can read a summary of the opening scene here. the summary will end at "Finally the tears ran out," but Langa will continue to feel anxiety throughout the chapter. please stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Langa couldn’t breathe.

Langa couldn’t breathe and he couldn’t move, he couldn’t move, his arms were stiff and tight around Reki’s body, and then he heard the voice again, from behind them, sounding so close and very, very far away. “Langa,” said the voice, but the word sounded distorted, like it was underwater, *Lane-ga* instead of *Lan-ga,* and Langa couldn’t breathe because he knew that voice, he knew that voice and only one person had ever pronounced his voice that way and the edges of his vision began to blur because oh god, oh god, oh god oh god oh god.

Langa couldn’t breathe.

Reki straightened up, grabbing at Langa’s numb arms, and tried to turn around. “Langa,” Reki said, his hands coming up to grab at Langa’s arm, “I thought I heard some—”

He stopped.

He stopped and he stared over Langa’s shoulder, his eyes wide and Langa

couldn’t

breathe.

He was afraid. Langa was afraid, he was numb with fear, his heart was beginning to pound against his ribs and he tried to clutch at Reki's body. Reki gently tried to turn him around, and Langa didn't want to move, he didn't want to see, but Reki's hands were fumbling and soft and Langa obeyed them without thinking, and then he was facing the open hallway and the voice was saying again,

"Langa,"

and god everything was so bright and loud, too loud, everything was blurring for a moment before Langa blinked, Langa blinked too hard and the world sharpened, the crowded hallway coming into focus, all the colors of people moving about, and the boy stepped closer, a boy with dark wavy hair and a button up shirt with three buttons undone, a necklace catching the light, a boy taller than Langa remembered, a boy nothing like Langa remembered.

Miguel's face was the face of a stranger.

"Langa!" Miguel said again, and *god,* god, god he had never tried to pronounce Langa's name right.

Langa tried to swallow, but he couldn't, his mouth was too dry and Miguel's voice was too loud, so loud in the bright crowded hallway, so many things moving at once and then *Miguel* was moving. Miguel was moving closer, a hand lifting in a greeting like he was going to reach out and touch Langa and Langa stumbled backward, frantic, against the ice machine and grabbed at Reki's hand.

Miguel stopped, a few steps in front of him, eyebrows raised, smiling.

"Langa," he said, as Langa's brain screeched, eyes darting around, and god, he was cornered, Miguel had him cornered, and and and — "Langa, what the hell!" Miguel was saying, so

loud, too loud. “I knew it was you — nobody else in the world would dye their hair that color — god, what the hell! How long’s it been? Dude, you just disappeared out of nowhere!”

Langa couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t move, he couldn’t — he couldn’t — he couldn’t understand, it didn’t make sense, Miguel in his bright blue shirt with his tousled hair and his white teeth, here in Okinawa, here in the *hotel,* and god he smiling, he had always been smiling, everything perfect in his life, this laugh in his voice like everything was being orchestrated for his own private delight, for his amusement, and god, god. Langa pressed himself desperately against the ice machine, gripping at Reki’s hand, brain pounding *cornered cornered cornered.*

He couldn’t speak. His brain had shut down.

“Who is that?” Reki asked, in Japanese and Langa remembered that Reki didn’t understand English, he didn’t understand what Miguel was saying. He fought his lungs. He fought to speak, squeezing Reki’s hand, Reki Reki Reki and —

“I,” Langa managed —

but then his throat closed up again because Miguel took another step forward, his hand coming up to mess with his hair, his perfect hair, and Langa tried to scramble closer to the ice machine, but his chest was so cold and tight with fear that he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t speak he couldn’t move, he couldn’t *move.*

“Langa, man,” Miguel said, amused, “Langa, you good, man?”

Langa’s brain screamed, *back away back away back away,* and he tried to swallow, but his throat was so tight, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t look away from Miguel and his perfect face, his blurry face, the face Langa could barely remember because god Miguel was faceless in all his nightmares, he had no mouth for Langa to kiss, and Langa couldn’t — he couldn’t — he couldn’t —

— and then Reki squeezed his hand and said, in the clumsiest, stiffest English, “Hello, how are you?” and Langa’s lungs clenched.

Oh, he thought, oh, oh, oh, because somewhere in the panicked pounding of his heart he registered Reki's *accent* and something crammed into place in his brain. He liked Reki's accent.

"I'm good," said Miguel, still amused, and then, in Japanese, "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. I'm still learning." He shifted his weight and Langa's chest seized again, *cornered, cornered, don't come closer,* and then Miguel grinned again, raising his eyebrows, and Langa's heart rose in his throat, panicked, because god god god god god that was not a good face, that was very bad face, that was Miguel's mocking face, the face he did when he was about to say something horrible and then laugh and say *don't be so sensitive I'm only kidding Langa dude my dude I'm only kidding!* And then Miguel gestured to their clasped hands, his mouth twitching, and said,

"This your boyfriend, Langa?"

And, oh.

Oh god.

Oh god oh god oh god. Langa's heart pounded so hard in his throat that he could barely breathe, and Reki glanced between them, and no no no Langa wanted to scream, he wanted to run, he didn't want Reki to know — he didn't want Reki to know how stupid he was, how idiotic, how pathetic. He didn't want Reki to know all the things Miguel had always pointed out, with that sly look on his face, *silly Langa misunderstanding again,* and then Reki wrapped his arm around Langa's waist, his palm so warm through the thin t-shirt, holding onto Langa's skin and Langa choked out,

"No,"

because god of course Miguel knew Reki wasn't his boyfriend, he knew nobody wanted to be Langa's boyfriend, god he knew, he knew too much, he knew everything and it wasn't *fair*. Miguel raised his eyebrows again, a sort of triumph, and Langa's heart was pounding frantically everywhere, in his chest in his head in his throat in his mouth, and Miguel tilted his head to the side.

“Ah, Langa,” he said, a pitying smile playing around his mouth. “You never change, do you?”

Reki squeezed Langa’s waist. Langa tried to swallow, he tried to swallow past the pounding of his heart but he couldn’t and something began to burn in his chest, like a sob, a sob that was quickly rising up his throat and god, god, god. He was going to cry. He was going to cry, right here in front of both of them, he could feel it, he was swaying a little on his feet with his throat all choked up because how could Miguel come here and ruin everything? Langa had been so happy. He had been so happy and warm and content, pretending in his little bubble that he loved Reki and Reki loved him and now Miguel had to come and blow a fuse in all of his dreams, crowding too close to Langa’s face, his voice saying nobody would ever want Langa that way, how disgusting, and *god Langa how could you possibly think that?*

Reki squeezed him again, and somewhere in the spinning panic Langa felt the warm clench of Reki’s hand on his waist. “It’s okay,” Reki was saying, holding him so tight, and then he was saying, his face turned to Miguel, “Hey, man, no offense, but what do you want? Like, who the hell *are* you?”

“I’m an old friend of Langa’s, from Canada,” said Miguel, and his voice, god his voice made Langa’s head hurt, so badly, like it was burning inside and then Miguel was looking at him again, his eyes too sharp, his voice lowering. “What, don’t you ever talk about me, Langa? Your old friend Miguel? Your bestie?”

Langa was trembling so hard now, and Reki squeezed him more tightly, pressing himself into his side and Langa’s chest *burned* because god, god, god he just wanted it to be true, for Reki to be his boyfriend, he wanted it so bad he wanted to sob, he wanted to sink to his knees and ball himself up and sob because Miguel knew. Miguel knew exactly what Langa was doing, pretending pathetically to be somebody’s boyfriend, somebody who didn’t love him and never would and Langa couldn’t breathe, for a moment he couldn’t breathe at all and

his vision began to blur

and then Reki said, “I have no idea who the hell you are,” his voice distant far away but so loud, so loud and Langa wanted to cry. Everything was so bright and blurry, the colors

shifting together, the world spinning and Miguel shifted his weight again and folded his arms.

“I guess Langa doesn’t tell you very much, then,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Langa, you never told your boyfriend about the time we—”

“What—” Langa burst out, clutching Reki’s hand, because oh god oh god oh god no—Miguel couldn’t say—“What are you doing here?”

The world tilted, and Langa’s throat swelled, and for a burning panicky moment he thought he would be sick, but then the world tilted back into place and the acid in his throat receded, burning in the back of his throat, and through the blurry colors he could see Miguel ruffling his own hair.

“What do you mean?” Miguel said. “I’m here with my family. You know that. We always come to Okinawa around this time of year. Don’t tell me you forgot already?”

“Dude, you know what—” Reki began, but Miguel waved his hand, shushing him, and said,

“I’m here with my girlfriend. You wanna meet her? I can call her right now, you two should meet, hang on.”

Langa’s eyes began to burn, god his whole body was burning, and he tried to blink and blink and blink because god he couldn’t cry right here in front of Miguel but his vision was blurring again and his heart was pounding in his throat and god, god, god, Miguel knew. He knew, he knew, he had always known how Langa felt about him, he had known and he had let Langa hold his hand and he had let Langa sleep in his bed and he had teased Langa for following him around like a puppy, like an adoring puppy, a lovesick puppy and Langa’s eyes were burning so hot, so hot, his throat swelling so tight, he was going to cry, he was going to cry right here.

“C’mon,” said Miguel, and he reached for Langa’s arm and Langa jerked so violently that Reki’s arm shot out, his palm against Miguel’s chest, shoving him away.

“Dude, what the hell!” said Reki, something dangerous in his voice, so loud, so loud Langa’s ears hurt and his whole body was beginning to shake. “Don’t.”

Miguel shoved Reki’s hand off him. “What’s your problem?” he said and Langa’s body shook harder, because oh god Miguel was so close, he was so close and he was *touching Reki,* he was touching Reki and what if he hurt him, what if he hurt Reki and the sick panic rose again in Langa’s throat, burning like acid like fear, because oh god oh god oh god he couldn’t let Reki be hurt but he couldn’t move, he couldn’t move to protect him and and and, and Miguel’s voice was burning in his ears when he said, “What’s *your* problem, Langa? You used to be, like, obsessed with me.”

Langa’s eyes burned again, and god, he was crying now, he was pretty sure he was crying and his whole body was burning and he didn’t want Miguel to see, he didn’t want Reki to see, *god* he didn’t want Reki to see any of this, and his whole body was shaking and and he was trying and trying and trying to swallow and he couldn’t and he tried to cover his face and he heard himself make this choked noise, on accident, and Reki said, “Get out of our way!” loudly, and shoved again at Miguel’s chest.

Then they were moving — Langa’s body was moving, Reki was guiding him away from the ice machine, saying something harsh to Miguel, but Langa couldn’t hear it because his head was spinning, his ears ringing, his throat burning so much and he *couldn’t breathe* no air god he couldn’t breathe he needed air and he tried to clutch at Reki, who was saying something else, in Japanese this time but Langa couldn’t understand, he couldn't understand he couldn’t understand he couldn’t understand and *oh god he was going to die —*

The whole world blurred. Langa choked again, and and and and

and the air rushed in, he sucked in a breath, and then another, and another and another and another until he was gulping down air, desperate, the hallway spinning around him, and Reki pressed his back against a wall, holding onto both his arms, saying something, his voice loud and frantic, the same word over and over until Langa could hear him, “Langa, Langa, Langa.”

Langa grabbed at his arms, too, heaving breaths, sucking in air and the hallway spun again, people milling around, and there was no Miguel anymore, no Miguel in the hallway only

Miguel in his head, his voice ringing so loud in Langa's ears, and he forced himself to gulp down another breath and another until he could gasp, "Reki."

"Langa," Reki said, his voice strained, intense, his hands tight on Langa's arms, his thumbs rubbing Langa's elbows, hard and fast. "Are you — are you okay? What can I do? What do you need, man, what do you need?"

Langa swallowed down more air, his lungs burning, and tried to focus his eyes on Reki's face, on the awkward sunburnt patches on Reki's forehead, on the creased wrinkle between Reki's eyebrows, on the peeling skin on Reki's nose. "Our room," he managed, and Reki stood up straighter, hastily, grabbing at the room key in Langa's pocket, and Langa shuddered at the way Reki hauled him off the wall, saying,

"It's okay, Langa, it's okay, hey, man, it's okay, okay? I got you, man."

Langa wanted to sob. He wanted to lay his head down on Reki's shoulder, right here in the hallway, and sob until he could no longer stand, but then he thought of their bed and sinking down onto the mattress and sobbing there and oh, oh his whole body sagged with *please god please* and Reki was guiding him, Reki had his arm around Langa's waist and was leading him down the hallway, fumbling with the room key in their door.

And then they were inside, and Reki was closing the door and Langa wobbled in the entryway, clinging to his arm, because the bed was so close but he couldn't let go of Reki's arm, he couldn't he couldn't he couldn't.

"Langa," Reki said, and then squeezed Langa's arm, with both his hands, the key card toppling to the floor, "Langa, c'mere, c'mere, dude."

And then, god, then Reki was leading him to the bed and Langa sank down onto it, and god he was crying already, his body heaving, his hands pressed to his face and Reki's arms were around him, Reki's arms were warm and solid and Langa wanted to hug him but he couldn't move his arms, he could only press his face into Reki's shoulder and sob.

“It’s okay,” Reki was whispering, “Langa, Langa, c’mere, hey, it’s okay,” and he was rubbing Langa’s back, and god his hands were so warm and he held Langa so tightly and Langa only sobbed harder, his chest so tight he couldn’t breathe, because god he had wanted Reki to love him. He had just wanted Reki to love him, and for a blissful moment it had felt like maybe he did, cocooned in their little bubble of safety at the ice machine, Langa’s face pressed peacefully to his hair, everything had been so good and they were going to kiss more when they came back, Reki was going to hold Langa gently in his arms and stroke at his face and mumble sweet compliments, and maybe Langa was finally going to be allowed to mumble *I love you* but now he couldn’t because now everything was spinning and his brain was broken and he was broken, he was broken and he had ruined everything.

Langa’s fists were so tight he could feel his palms burning but he couldn’t let go, and his chest was heaving as he gasped sobs into Reki’s shirt, and Reki held him and rubbed his hands on Langa’s back and whispered soft words into his ears, and god, god Langa was never going to be able to hear the sweet things Reki might have said while they kissed each other to sleep and he cried harder, his body shaking. God, why, why, *why* ? Why had Miguel had to appear out of nowhere, why was his body so big and solid and real in the hallway, why was his voice so loud, why had he come and shoved his way into their perfect little bubble and shattered everything? Langa should have known, and he sobbed harder, his chest tighter and tighter and tighter because he should have known, of course it was all pretend, of course it was all just a blissful daydream, of course this wasn’t real life. How could it be real life, Reki touching him so delicately, like they were in love? No. No, god, everything hurt and Langa’s whole body hurt and he sobbed even harder when he thought of seeing Miguel again — in the morning at the hotel breakfast, on the stairs, *god* in the elevator where he couldn’t escape — no no no he was scared he was scared and he was sobbing so hard he couldn’t breathe and he needed to hold onto Reki but his hands were solid fists and he couldn’t, he couldn’t, he couldn’t do anything right.

“Langa,” Reki was whispering, “hey, Langa, hey, okay, baby, I need you to breathe, okay? ‘Cause I feel like you’re not breathing and you need air, okay, then you can cry again, hey, hey, it’s okay.”

Langa gasped a breath, and Reki said,

“Good, okay, good, good, hey, it’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay, but one of Reki’s hands slid away from his back and folded around his fist instead, rubbing the knuckles, and Langa could feel the tears soaking into his collar, into his hair and god he had gotten Reki’s shirt wet. He had ruined Reki’s shirt. Another wave of sobs

shook his body, and Reki held more tightly, prying his fingers apart, wrapping his hand around Langa's and when Langa clenched his fingers tightly, Reki just whispered,

"Yeah, okay, good, good, it's okay."

He slid his hand up into Langa's hair, smoothing it off his forehead and Langa heaved in another breath and heaved out a sob, slumping against him, his head falling onto Reki's shoulder and Reki said,

"Good, yeah, good, it's okay, dude, Langa, it's okay,"

and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, still clutching his hand so tightly it burned, tears slipping out because how could Reki say that? How could Reki murmur *good* as if Langa wasn't a chaotic whirlwind of disaster that ruined everything and couldn't see properly and couldn't understand anything and couldn't speak when spoken to and, and, and he could feel himself crying again into Reki's shirt. Reki's soft sleep shirt, it was so pretty and Langa had ruined it, Langa ruined everything, they had been so happy and soft together with that perfect little *Do Not Disturb* sign holding the world at bay, and they were supposed to kiss and pretend to be in love and now Langa was sobbing on the bed, and he had ruined things for Reki, who he loved so much, who he had just wanted to hold and kiss and drift off to sleep with and he was crying so much he couldn't breathe.

"Langa," Reki was whispering, stroking his hair, his hands still rubbing Langa's back, squeezing Langa's fingers, Reki's hands always in motion like if he stopped for one minute Langa would fall apart, and Langa gasped another breath. And then Reki mumbled, "Langa, baby," and Langa's breath stuck in his throat, and then he was crying again because it sounded so *good* and he wanted to hear it again and he was pathetic, he was helpless he was pathetic he was a mess.

Reki squeezed him, and Langa sobbed, and then Reki whispered it again, "Baby, baby it's okay, you're good," and Langa's throat ached with how much he was crying, how much he was hurting. He finally managed to unclench his fists and tangle them in Reki's shirt instead, holding on for dear life, as if Reki would get up and leave and no, no no no Langa couldn't, he couldn't think about that. He buried his face in Reki's shoulder and cried until he was exhausted.

Finally the tears ran out. Langa stayed slumped against Reki's body, still heaving breaths, as Reki petted his hair, his back, his hands, touching everywhere like he could capture the pain somehow and pull it out, even though he couldn't, and Langa kept his eyes closed, his cheek pressed to Reki's shoulder. The sunburn still burnt brightly on the tops of Langa's arms every time Reki ran his hands over them, but he was still glad for it, Reki touching him, Reki grounding him to earth, otherwise Langa's body would be gone and he would only be thoughts spiraling away into nothingness. He sucked in another breath and released it, long and shaky and slow. He knew Reki couldn't take the pain away, but his whispering was still soothing, his hands were soothing like the aloe vera he had rubbed into Langa's burnt skin and maybe he could help calm the pain, just a little.

"Thank you," Langa mumbled into Reki's shoulder, too quiet to be heard maybe, his throat still burning, and Reki hummed against him, his hands going to Langa's hair and then Langa's forehead, tucking the hair back, smoothing it over his ears and Langa breathed out again, shakily. Reki was always moving. Even when Langa was falling apart, Reki was scrambling around and gathering up the pieces to put him back together.

"Dude," Reki said, softly, so softly, "it's okay. You don't need to thank me. Hey, are you okay? Is this okay? I can hold you more if you want."

Langa squeezed his eyes shut, fisting his hands more tightly in Reki's t-shirt. "Please," he managed, and then, "You can hold me?"

"Uh-huh," said Reki, petting his shoulders, his hands soothing and warm. "Any way you want, man. You wanna lay down? Or, here — c'mere." He tugged Langa across the mattress and Langa nearly fell over, wrists digging into the soft mattress, but Reki hauled him up, collapsing against the pillows and letting his legs fall open. He pulled Langa into the space between his knees, settling Langa's head against his chest, so that Langa's body was snuggled into him, Reki's arms and legs caging him in, safe. One of Reki's hands settled in his hair and the other tangled between his fingers. "How's this?" Reki murmured, and Langa shivered a little at the way the words vibrated through Reki's chest.

God. God, it felt good, it was just what he had needed, and when he breathed out shakily, he could feel his body sagging against Reki's, the crying draining out of him. God, he was exhausted, and all his limbs ached, but Reki's hands were soothing, and every time Langa shifted, he brushed against Reki's body in some way and god, he could cry again with how good it felt.

“Yeah,” he managed, and Reki hummed, and Langa shuddered again because he could feel the sound and how was Reki so good? How was Reki so kind and good to him even though Langa had ruined everything? How come Reki still wanted to hold him even though they were supposed to kiss and kiss and kiss until they fell asleep, romantic and sweet, and Langa had messed up by being the opposite of romantic? God, how had Reki ever thought a date with Langa could possibly go right? Of course Langa had made things go wrong somehow.

“You’re okay,” Reki was murmuring, into his hair, smoothing it off his forehead, all the damp pieces clinging his cheeks, and Langa heaved out another breath, his body slumping more heavily against him. “You’re good, baby, you’re good. Ah—sorry. Should I not—” He laughed nervously. “I just—that’s what my mom calls us when we’re upset.”

“It’s okay,” Langa managed. He was too tired to lie and tell Reki to stop, even though the word *baby* had already sunk so deeply into his chest that he knew he was going to yearn to hear it again, every day after this. His eyes sank closed. “I like it.”

Reki laughed against him again, quiet, nervous. “Okay,” he said. “Baby.” Langa’s body hurt from how good it felt, that word burying itself into his heart, and he burrowed his face more snugly against Reki’s chest as Reki smoothed his hair off his forehead. Then Langa felt the dry press of Reki’s lips there, against the damp, sweaty skin of his forehead, and his throat swelled up as Reki breathed out another nervous laugh. “My mom does that, too,” he said, and Langa tangled his hand in Reki’s t-shirt again, just to have something to hold along with his hand.

“M’sorry,” he mumbled, and Reki scratched his fingers through Langa’s hair, over his scalp, and Langa’s body sank more heavily into the mattress because god, it felt good.

“Why?” Reki asked, softly, and Langa swallowed, because of course Reki must know why. Langa had ruined their wonderful night having a goddamn breakdown in the *fucking* hotel hallway, after he had dreamed of this night for so long, of cuddling with Reki between the hotel sheets, of holding his hand. The night was supposed to be perfect, and it almost had been, but then Miguel had shown up out of nowhere like a nightmare, trying to expose Langa’s horrible, humiliating past.

“I ruined stuff,” he mumbled into Reki’s t-shirt, and Reki’s hand tightened in his hair for a moment before smoothing it out again.

“What?” he said. “No, dude. No. You didn’t ruin anything. What are you talking about?”

“I—” How was Langa supposed to explain? He wanted to say they were supposed to cuddle happily in the bed and whisper romantic things until dawn, but he was too exhausted and embarrassed to admit that, so instead he said, shakily, “I’m always ruining stuff without meaning to.”

“No,” said Reki, squeezing his hand, lifting his damp hair off his neck so he could settle his other hand there, warm against the skin. “No, Langa, dude, no. Don’t be so down on yourself, man. You’re—I freak out sometimes, too. Remember the mixer? It’s okay. It’s cool. I mean, it’s not okay, I know it’s not the same thing, it’s just, I’m just glad I can be here with you when it happens, okay? Like, just, like I’m glad you’re not shutting me out.”

Langa breathed out, trembling a little. Reki was glad—that Langa relied on him? That sounded too good to be true. Maybe Reki was just saying it to be nice. But still, the words helped Langa’s limbs sink against the mattress, a tension relaxing in his chest, a tension he hadn’t even known he was holding onto. “Thanks,” he mumbled, again, and Reki kissed his hair, one of his knees bouncing against the mattress, and Langa pressed his cheek to Reki’s heart. It was going so fast. Reki’s heart was always fast, faster than a normal person’s, and his body was always moving somehow, restless, but somehow it helped. It helped because even though Langa was an exhausted mess, Reki was imperfect and jittery too, they were both messy, and Reki was right, he had broken down before, too, in front of Langa. Langa breathed out, closing his eyes against the soothing heartbeat. He loved him. God, even in the worst moments he loved him.

Reki stroked his hair for a long time, kissing his head occasionally. Langa was glad Reki hadn’t asked who Miguel was, or what had happened, even though Langa knew he would have to explain eventually. If he tried to talk about it now, he knew he would start crying again — even thinking about Miguel made his limbs start to feel trembly again, so quickly he pressed his cheek to Reki’s heart and focused all his energy on the heartbeat there.

A long while later, when his throat began to unclench again, Langa managed to ask, “I didn’t ruin the date?” because he knew that Reki would comfort him, and for once Langa wanted to be selfish and ask for comfort.

And immediately Reki's body bounced, holding him tightly with his knees, and said, "No! No, no, of course not. Dude, never." He stroked Langa's hair again, and Langa settled against him, and Reki said, "Hey, hey, baby. I have an idea, okay? You cried a lot, you need to drink something, I'm gonna make you tea, okay?"

Langa cracked his eyes open. His eyelids hurt from all the crying, and he gripped onto Reki's t-shirt, because he didn't want to let go, he didn't want Reki to leave this cozy little cocoon of their bodies. Langa could feel his throat swelling a little, at the thought of being stranded alone on this big unfamiliar bed, but then Reki rubbed his thumb over Langa's cheek and said,

"C'mere, you can come with me, okay? C'mere." He tugged Langa up, climbing off the bed, and clumsily Langa unfolded his limbs, stumbling off the bed and onto the rough carpet. Reki wrapped his arm around Langa's waist. "Hah, we forgot the ice bucket, didn't we?" he said. "That's okay. We'll just use tap water. You'll survive."

Langa didn't care about the tap water, he only cared about Reki, and after Reki grabbed a paper cup and filled it up in the sink, Langa was allowed to stand behind him at the hotel's rickety microwave, his arms securely around Reki's waist again. He lay his cheek against Reki's hair and breathed out, long and slow, soaking in the feeling of his warm body, the comfort of Reki's smell, all of Reki's tiny vibrations echoing in his own nervous heart until, quietly, the world began to go calm around him again.

The panic had faded, but Langa knew it was still lodged there, tucked away in the very core of his heart, and maybe it would always be there. The thought made him want to cry. But then Reki rubbed at Langa's knuckles, clasped around his stomach, and said softly, "See, you got room service after all, even the service is really just me," and Langa pressed his mouth to the back of Reki's head, half a kiss and half a stifled sob.

Maybe he could never be fixed, Langa thought, his heart aching with all the tears still stuck there, but maybe he didn't need to be, if Reki was still here even when he was broken.

He breathed out shakily again, kissing Reki's hair, once and then again and again. Finally Reki turned in his arms, the paper cup of steaming water clasped in his hands, and his nose nudged briefly against Langa's cheek, because they were standing so close, nearly chest to chest. "Here," Reki said. "Let's sit down again, okay?"

Langa didn't let go of his waist, and Reki laughed a little, in his throat, and guided them clumsily back to the bed, setting the tea down until Langa was safely wrapped up in his arms and the blanket again. Then, with Langa's head pillowed on Reki's chest, Reki allowed him to cup the hot paper cup between his hands.

Langa's throat was so full he thought he would never be able to drink, but just holding the cup close to his heart helped calm the shakiness. The blanket was snug around his knees, his feet so warm and cozy with Reki's feet pressed to either side, his toes tucked underneath Langa's. Reki was massaging one of his shoulders, with slightly too much pressure, and Langa wanted to cry with how comfortable he felt on the soft mattress, surrounded by pillows, being spoiled this way. Reki always knew how to take care of him, he thought, in ways Langa would have been much too embarrassed to ask for, Reki was so generous with his affection, practically overflowing it, and Langa cuddled as close to him as possible, his chest swelling with gratitude so big he could barely breathe.

I love you, he wanted to say, but instead he just squeezed his eyes closed and hoped Reki could feel it, somehow.

"Hey," Reki said softly, a long while later, his left knee still jiggling rhythmically at Langa's back, a soothing vibration, and Langa made a noise against his chest. Reki shifted a little, carding his fingers through Langa's hair, and Langa tilted his head up, into the touch, and he felt Reki take a deep breath before saying, "Langa. Can I say nice things about you?"

Langa's chest paused, his throat swelling up even bigger against his lungs, and oh, oh, oh. God, he was going to cry again. He tried to swallow again, squeezing his eyes more tightly closed, keeping his head tilted up as Reki thumbed clumsily at his forehead. God. How could one person be so *good?* Langa was going to fall apart again, just from the gentle sound of Reki's voice, and he managed to choke out, "I—" but then he couldn't go on, because his throat was filling up and he had to duck his head, burying it in Reki's chest.

God. Reki was still wearing the same t-shirt, even though Langa had stained it beyond repair with his tears, and it made him want to sob all over again.

He loved him. He loved him so much.

“Sorry,” Reki said, his voice scratchy and hesitant, running his fingers through Langa’s hair again, and Langa buried his mouth against Reki’s chest so he wouldn’t whimper. “It’s just, I, uh. I came up with lots of things when I was trying to find the romantic compliments, but it’s just, I thought none of them were good enough to say, y’know? ‘Cause, like, I don’t really know how to make stuff sound good.” He sounded embarrassed. “But then I thought, hey, maybe Langa doesn’t know this stuff about himself, like maybe it would help to say it anyway.”

Langa swallowed, and then he swallowed again and again because god his face was *so warm* and his neck was burning and god. He was just. He was so overwhelmed, already teetering on the edge of sobbing again, so fragile and trembly and Reki was going to *ruin* him, Reki was going to break him into a million tiny pieces until Langa was a sobbing mess in his arms, but god, god he wanted to know the nice things, his throat just *burned* with how badly he wanted to know.

“You can—say them,” he managed, muffled by Reki’s t-shirt, and god his chest was beginning to throb with how much he loved him, how badly he wanted to tell him, and he was so so so warm under the blankets. Reki squeezed him with his knees and Langa almost whimpered again, curling himself even more tightly against his chest, and god he just wanted to blurt it out, *I love you,* he couldn’t hide the feelings anymore, they had grown too big, too overwhelming, too hard to keep caged inside his own heart and *god* he wanted to say them and, and, and

and Langa had to press his mouth to the thin fabric to stop himself from sobbing. Because if he told him, maybe Reki wouldn’t want to be friends anymore and Langa couldn’t, he couldn’t, he couldn’t go through that again.

“Ah,” said Reki, doing that little breathless laughing thing he did and putting his mouth briefly against Langa’s hair, shifting against the pillows again, and Langa’s heart throbbed again. “Sorry — hah. I’m bad at this. I guess. I guess I think you’re really cool? Like, you always look good, no matter what we’re doing. And I like when I see you get all hyper focused when you’re doing something, like at work when you’re organizing the storage room, sometimes I’ll call your name like eight times and you won’t hear ‘cause you’re concentrating so hard? Like, you wanna do everything right, even if it’s just a small thing nobody else would care about. Ah — and I like your accent. But you knew that.”

He laughed into Langa’s hair, self-conscious, and Langa tried to swallow, but he couldn’t because he was so choked up, his body burning up with how warm it was under the blankets, wrapped up in Reki’s arms. He wanted to hear those words over and over, all of them, *you’re*

really cool, and *you always look good,* Langa had never believed those things about himself, but hearing them in Reki's voice made them sound almost real, and his heart was throbbing again. "Why?" he managed.

"I don't know," Reki said, burying his face in Langa's hair for a moment, and when Langa blinked open his scratchy eyes, he could see Reki's cheeks tinged pink and his heart throbbed again. "I guess — ah. It's stupid. It's just, it's nice to hear you being careful when you're picking words. And the way you say my name. Also, also, okay, I like the way you frown around rooms when you walk in? Until you see me, and then your face goes all soft and happy." Langa's chest warmed, his toes curling in the blankets, and then Reki added, "And, oh yeah, you're, like, super brave. Have I told you that? Man, you could do anything."

Langa's throat was so full, his face so warm, and he could barely manage, "I'm not—" because god, he could barely even give a presentation in school without panicking, but Reki squeezed him with his knees and Langa swallowed the words back, because maybe they were true, even if only Reki believed them. He tilted his head up when Reki smoothed his hair away from his face, and for a moment he caught sight of Reki's eyes, pretty and amber and honest in the light, so honest and open and pure, and Langa *ached* with how much he loved him. Reki pressed his mouth to Langa's hair again, embarrassed, the color high in his face as he rubbed his knee.

"Yeah, man," he said. "You are. You make me feel like I could do anything, too." His voice dipped into something reverent. " *Anything* , man. God."

He squeezed Langa again, and Langa buried his face in Reki's chest, too overwhelmed to speak. Reki kept stroking at his hair, and Langa managed to shove the paper cup between his knees so he could wiggle his arms around Reki's waist, and Reki gave another muffled sort of embarrassed laugh, and Langa clung on tightly. He ached, he ached with how much he loved him, with how much he wanted to tell him. Somehow Reki made him feel invincible, too, sometimes, like when they had been in the ocean together with the water crashing over them, and Langa had wanted so badly to grab Reki's face and kiss him fiercely until the world ended around them.

"You're so good," Reki said, still sounding embarrassed, petting Langa's hair, and Langa made a muffled sound against his chest at the soft vibrations of Reki's voice. "So *good* , man." There was an ache in the way he said the words, shaking his head a little. "You're my favorite person, Langa. Ah — you'd be anybody's favorite person."

Langa's throat swelled, and he choked a little because oh, *oh,* he had saved that text message, he had read it so many times, late at night when his body was sore with longing, cold without Reki next to him, *you're my favorite person,* Reki had written at 2:33 am and now he had said those words aloud. *You're my favorite person,* in his low, scratchy voice, his fingers scraping at the nape of Langa's neck and Langa pressed his mouth to Reki's t-shirt so he wouldn't whimper with how *good* it felt.

They stayed pressed together for a long, long time, as Langa's head swam in and out of sleep, and he tried to breathe in the feeling of holding Reki, whenever he remembered to. He wanted to stay awake to cherish this, the feeling of being Reki's favorite person, because *oh* it was the warmest feeling he had ever known.

Reki kissed his head again, after a long while, and Langa mumbled against his chest. "You're sleepy, dude," Reki said, and Langa mumbled again, because he wanted to say that he liked how Reki always said *sleepy* instead of *tired* or *drained* or *exhausted,* even though Langa was all of the above, because somehow always Reki made bad things sound not so bad. "C'mere," Reki said, and he shuffled down the bed, rearranging Langa's body and reaching to turn off the light, settling down so that his chest was pressed to Langa's back, his limbs wrapped around Langa's.

"Nnngh," Langa mumbled, into the pillows, because he wanted to say thank you, he wanted to tell Reki how warm he felt, cuddled in his arms, as if he was safe, as if he was home, but then Reki was brushing his lips against the back of Langa's neck, mumbling *good night* into his skin, and Langa's mind blurred into sleep and bliss.

Langa awoke with his mouth full of cotton and his mind full of Miguel.

He jolted up, but something was holding him down—something soft and warm—and Langa's head fell back against the pillows. He stared up at the white ceiling, the unfamiliar room spinning, gray from the early-morning light filtering through the curtains, and where was he? In Canada, behind the bleachers? In Canada, his vision blurring to white, Miguel's voice ringing in his head *you misunderstood* and Langa's heart seized — but then someone grumbled softly, snuggling into his chest, and Langa looked down and the world fell back into place.

Reki's red hair was pillowed on his chest, his limbs wrapped around Langa's body like a starfish, and Langa's breath left his body in a *whoosh.* He let his eyes sink closed again, his hand finding Reki's back, and god, he was warm, so warm in his sleep.

Langa wanted to hold him forever. He didn't want to think about Miguel, ever again, he only wanted to snuggle into the mattress with Reki's body pressed close. Reki mumbled again, nosing at his chest, and Langa's heart squeezed, because god Reki was so cute in his sleep, so precious, and Langa wanted to hug him. Clumsily he untangled his arms from the blankets and wrapped them around Reki's shoulders, squeezing, and Reki made another mumbling sound against Langa's stuttering heart.

Langa squeezed him one more time, pressing his trembly hands to Reki's back, and Reki sighed when he let go. He raised his head, blinking blearily up at Langa, his hair plastered to his face, and mumbled, "G'mo'ing, L'nga."

Langa's heart stuttered again, and he whispered back, clumsily, "Good morning." Reki's face was so pink and flushed and incoherent, after a moment he lay his head back down, snuggling at Langa's chest, and Langa released another shaky breath. He wrapped his arms around Reki more tightly, feeling Reki's cheek press to his heart, where he must be able to feel the uneven thrum of Langa's heartbeat, and Langa pressed his face into Reki's wild hair.

Last night had been so much. Langa's head hurt just thinking about it.

Maybe he should go back to the doctor, he thought, and then screwed up his eyes. He knew his mom would find him a therapist if she knew he was having panic attacks again, but god, did that mean Langa had to *tell* her about them? He wanted to die just thinking about it. Panicking was humiliating, and his mom would definitely ask about Miguel, and then Langa would have to admit how horribly he had misunderstood their friendship, and how much he was probably misunderstanding his friendship with Reki, and, and, and,

"Langa," Reki mumbled against his chest, his hand finding Langa's stomach and tugging down his t-shirt carefully over the skin. "Stop thinking so much."

Langa let out a breathless “ah,” as Reki patted him on the hip with his warm hand. When he opened his eyes again, his head still aching, he could see Reki gazing up at him, eyes heavy-lidded with sleep. Reki gave him a clumsy smile, and Langa’s heart squeezed again. Reki was so beautiful in the mornings. Langa could barely believe he was allowed to be here with him like this.

“Mm,” Reki said, snuggling his cheek against Langa’s chest again. “S’too early to think.” He petted Langa’s stomach through the t-shirt, and Langa tried not to shudder. God, he was so warm. Carefully Langa untangled his hand from their bodies and slid his fingers into Reki’s hair, pausing to see if Reki would flinch away, but Reki just hummed again and tilted his head into the touch, his eyes closed in a sort of blissful smile.

Langa could barely breathe. He ran his hand gently through Reki’s hair, frizzy and tangled from sleep, and then again and then again, his fingers smoothing over Reki’s forehead, warm and creased from the pillow, the sunburn uneven above his eyebrows. Langa’s heart was stuck in his throat. He had wanted to pet Reki’s hair like for so long, since the afternoon when Reki had first lay his head in Langa’s lap, but this was even better, because Reki’s whole body was pressed so snugly to his own, his leg hooked over Langa’s knee, and Langa couldn’t tear his eyes away from the little smile on Reki’s face. Ah. Ah, he looked —

Langa’s heart stuttered. He looked like he was in love, but no, no, Langa couldn’t start thinking that way. Quickly he tried to shove the thoughts down, but they kept rising up, filling his entire mind, overwhelming. Reki sighed against him, nudging his head up into Langa’s palm, his ankle squeezing Langa’s legs, and Langa had to swallow several times to try to force his heart rate back under control.

Reki didn’t love him, he told himself fiercely. Langa shouldn’t misunderstand. He *couldn’t* misunderstand.

He needed something to distract himself, something to focus on besides Reki’s sleepy smile and soft sighs, so clumsily Langa began tangling strands of Reki’s hair together. He wanted to give him tiny braids, the way he had seen Reki give his baby sisters, and somehow the repetitive motion was calming. Langa squinted at the hair, at his knobbly, pale fingers, the ones that never quite seemed to be his own, and Reki hummed against him. He tugged again at the hem of Langa’s shirt, smoothing it down, and Langa’s throat swelled when he thought of Reki trying to take care of him, keeping him safe and protected and pure and, and Langa had to swallow, hard, blinking at his own fingers.

He had fumbled for Reki's hair a long time, twisting at least seven tiny braids into the sides, when Reki finally raised his head again, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Are you braiding my hair?" he asked, garbled as he tried to stifle a yawn, and Langa's heart stuttered again.

"Uh — yeah," Langa said, swallowing. "Sorry."

Reki gave him a sleepy smile. "It's okay," he said, reaching up and tucking Langa's hair behind his ear, and Langa shivered at the way Reki's warm palm touched his ear. "Lemme do yours?"

"Ah—" Langa hadn't expected that, but he sat up when Reki tugged at his t-shirt, and he let Reki maneuver them on the bed until they were both nestled against the pillows. Reki's hands smoothed Langa's hair up off his neck, and Langa shivered again when Reki's nails scratched lightly at the skin under his ear, and Reki hummed again, his knee pressing against Langa's thigh.

"What are you thinking about?" Reki asked, and Langa pressed his hands tightly between his legs. He didn't want to talk about his thoughts. He would rather hear about Reki's thoughts, Reki's rambling account of his dreams, Reki's jumbled plans for the week and chores he had left at home and random skateboarding ideas he had had while sleeping. But Reki was probably worried about him. Langa had broken down in his arms last night, and then he remembered the way Miguel had put his hands on Reki, and he had to swallow, hard, against the sudden burning in his throat.

God. Langa never wanted to see him again.

"I…" He tried to clear his throat, but the burning wouldn't go away, and it was hard to work his mouth around the words. "I just...I'm sorry for...for everything."

"No, dude," said Reki, running his fingers through the top of Langa's hair, pulling the wispy pieces gently away from his face. "Don't apologize, okay? I just, I just wanna know what happened. Like, who was that guy?"

Langa swallowed again. His heart was beginning to pound again, and he could feel the weight of the question settled into the air around them, so thick he could barely breathe. After he told the truth nothing would be the same, ever again. Reki's hands would fall away. He would say, *what?* He wouldn't be angry that Langa was gay, he would be supportive, in the best way he knew how, but he probably wouldn't want to touch Langa anymore, he would never allow Langa to kiss him again. Langa had known this all along, he had known this day had to come, but a lump still rose in his throat, his hands beginning to tremble in his lap. Maybe he could turn and ask, in a whisper, for one more kiss, before he told the truth? But no. His heart hurt. Reki would probably say no, and then all of Langa's courage would collapse underneath him.

Instead he screwed up his eyes and willed himself to always remember the feeling of Reki's fingers fumbling gently with his hair, god, the way Reki's breathing puffed softly against the back of his neck. Langa could feel his throat swelling up already, and if he didn't tell the truth now, he never would, so he fiercely held in his mind the memory of Reki's mouth pressing to his own, the way Reki had whined when Langa pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, and Langa swallowed and he swallowed and he swallowed and he said,

"He was the friend I told you about, the one who stopped hanging out with me."

And then he pressed his hands tightly between his thighs and swallowed one last time and said,

"He...he didn't want to be friends anymore because I...because I tried to kiss him."

Reki's hands paused.

Langa squeezed his eyes shut, fisting his hands in his t-shirt, feeling his heart pounding in his palms. God. God, the room was suffocating, the air so thick, and he already wanted to take the words back. Reki's hands were so still. He was probably putting the pieces together, realization and horror dawning on him, understanding for the first time that Langa had done the same thing to him, that Langa fantasized guiltily about dating him, that Langa's stomach squirmed all shivery and hot when he sat on Reki's lap. Reki breathed out, and Langa's heart rose in his throat, because god, oh god Reki was about to pull his hands away in disgust, god he was about to climb off the bed and walk away, he was about to—

Reki tugged on Langa's hair again, twisting the pieces together. Langa heard him clear his throat, and his heart thumped painfully.

"You — why did you try to kiss him?" asked Reki, his voice sort of strangled.

Langa tried to breathe through his tight throat. Reki hadn't moved away. Reki was still braiding his hair, pulling a little too hard, his hands clumsier than before, but he was still here. "I—" Langa didn't want to say it. He didn't want to say it, but he owed Reki the truth, Reki had done so much for him, he had held Langa while he sobbed and made him tea in a paper cup and stroked his hair and Langa needed to tell him the truth even though it would change everything so he swallowed hard, once and then twice and then said,

"Because I was in love with him."

Reki's hands paused again. And, and, and Langa could feel a sick feeling rising in his throat, like fear, like terror, like *please please please don't be mad, please don't leave me, please just hear me out.* Reki cleared his throat again. And then again. Oh god. Oh god, he was angry, oh god, oh god he was about to snap, oh god Langa flinched because Reki's hands were in his hair and oh god if he pulled right now, it would hurt, it would hurt and oh god Langa shouldn't have said anything, he had ruined everything, oh god oh fuck, oh —

Reki cleared his throat again. Langa tried not to choke on his own panic, thick in his throat. "I — oh," said Reki, and he laughed, self-consciously, shifting on the bed. "Really? I — I didn't know — hah. I didn't know you'd been in love before. Ah — I mean, of course you have been, huh? I should have known."

He laughed again, high-pitched and strained, and Langa's panic crumbled into confusion, because — what? His mouth was drier than ever, and when he opened his eyes, everything was blurry. Why did Reki sound — like that? Why wasn't he pulling his hands away? Why wasn't he asking if Langa was gay, why wasn't he saying, *oh I thought you were straight* or *wait, you play for the other team* or any of the things they said in movies? Langa opened his mouth, but it was so dry and he had no words, he was completely lost, so he clamped his mouth shut.

Maybe Reki didn't realize Langa was trying to come out to him. But how was Langa supposed to make it any clearer?

Reki cleared his throat again, shifting. “Hang on,” he said. “I’m gonna tie this off — ah.” He fumbled more with Langa’s braid, and a couple of pieces of hair fell back around Langa’s face, and he tried to swallow again. The panic was mostly receding away. Reki hadn’t reacted angrily. Reki hadn’t reacted in any way that made sense, period, but wasn’t that better than shoving Langa away and spitting out that they couldn’t be friends anymore?

“Sorry,” Langa managed to say, even though he wasn’t sure what he was apologizing for, and Reki waved his hands wildly around Langa’s shoulders, exclaiming,

“No! No no no. Don’t be sorry.”

He cleared his throat again, dropping his hands, and Langa turned around, afraid to see his expression, but Reki’s face just looked flushed and red, and Langa’s heart stumbled. Why — why did Reki look like that? Nothing made sense. Nothing made sense, Langa didn’t *understand,* god why didn’t he understand *anything?*

“I, um,” he began, at the same time that Reki said, “So—” and they both paused, red-faced, and Reki began waving his hands again, frantic. “Sorry!” he said. “You go.”

“No,” said Langa, his neck warm, so warm he could barely think straight. God. God, what was happening? “I don’t… what were you going to say?”

Reki’s face was so red. “I was just — I was just going to say, like, so, so you like boys?”

Langa opened his mouth and then closed it, swallowing, his face burning. God. Reki was going to make him *say* it? Hadn’t Langa been obvious enough? God, he got flushed every time Reki so much as leaned into his space, every time Reki touched him on the elbow, how had Reki not figured out how badly Langa liked him? His whole body *ached* with how much he liked Reki, and he swallowed again. “Uh,” Langa said. “Yeah, I... I do.”

“Oh,” said Reki, and then he gave the awkward laugh again, rubbing at his shoulder. “Okay! Cool. Cool cool cool. Hah. I didn’t know that.”

Langa stared at him, watching the way Reki wiped his hands on his shorts, pulling at the hem of his t-shirt, his laughter dying away awkwardly. Langa's brain felt stuffed full of cotton again, and he was completely lost, he had no idea what was going on. Reki didn't seem— angry, but was he uncomfortable? He must be uncomfortable. He was reacting this way because he didn't know what to say, and Langa swallowed with difficulty and said quickly,

"It doesn't — it doesn't change anything,"

and Reki's shoulders slumped a little, and then he was rubbing at his mouth, laughing again, saying hastily, "Nah, nah of course not! Of course not, man. I understand. Haha. Okay. You could've told me, you know, I mean — I mean, thanks for telling me now, I mean, that's what I meant."

He reached out and squeezed Langa's arm, quickly, before dropping his hand again. The room felt so warm, and Langa's whole body was flushed and he was so, so confused. "Thanks for listening," he managed. He wanted to say, *thanks for not being weird about it,* but Reki *was* being weird about it, just not in a way that Langa could comprehend. Maybe he was just trying to wrap his head around having a gay best friend, a gay friend who had sat in his lap last night and sucked on his mouth. Langa's chest felt hot and stifled. Well. Well, he had come out, and it had been horrifically awkward, but at least it was over, right? And Reki hadn't walked away.

"Of course, man," said Reki, swinging his legs over the edge of the mattress and scrambling off the bed, scratching at his side. "Of course! You'll have to tell me more about it later. Like — ah, what kinds of guys you're into, and all that."

Langa swallowed, flushing warmer. God. God, he was *not* prepared to talk about his type in boys with Reki. How had he not prepared himself for this? Of course Reki would be awkwardly, enthusiastically supportive. He would probably start pointing out guys in their class and scribbling notes asking if Langa was attracted to them, and Langa swallowed again, trying to shove down the flush. The only person he was attracted to was Reki, with his raw-red sunburn tan lines and arm freckles and soft huggable body and the tiny dips at the bottom of his spine that Langa had glimpsed two times and dreamed about a thousand, and god, oh god.

He climbed gingerly off the bed. He was never going to survive this, he thought, his hands a little trembly, his bones still aching with all the leftover anxiety. Maybe they could sleep together on the train home, instead of talking about boys. He would like that. God, he needed it.

"C'mere, Langa," Reki called from the bathroom, a few minutes later, after Langa had struggled into his fresh clothes. Langa walked over hesitantly, peering inside as Reki tied his headband clumsily around his head, the tiny braids poking out over the top, and then he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, and oh.

Oh.

Langa stepped more fully into the bathroom. He had forgotten that Reki had braided his hair, and he raised his fingers to his own head, staring. Something like wonder began to kindle in his stomach. "I wanted you to see yourself!" Reki was saying, clearing his throat again, his face bright and flushed in the mirror when he gave Langa another clumsy smile. "What do you think? Do you like it? I think I did a good job."

Langa couldn't speak for a moment. The anxiety was draining away, a sort of awe filling his fingertips instead, because he had never seen himself with his hair pulled back away from his face like this, and he had to turn his head again to see the twist of the braid, the bony line of his jaw, the hollowness of his cheekbones. He looked different somehow. Older maybe. Less afraid, as if he was no longer hiding behind his hair, as if maybe he could be expressive with his face the way Reki was, as if maybe people would look at him and see someone human.

Jesus. He probably really did need therapy, didn't he? If a simple braid was moving him so much. Langa had to swallow, and then he had to swallow again before he could manage, "I like it." He didn't know how to put the wonder into words, so he just said, "I… I feel like I'm seeing… me."

The grin broke out over Reki's face again, his cheeks dimpling, and he threw his arm around Langa's shoulders. "I'm glad, dude," he said, and then he cleared his throat again, still smiling. Langa wanted to melt into his side, but he couldn't take his eyes off himself in the mirror, turning his face at every angle, angles that somehow he had never seen before. Was this what it felt like to belong in your body? Langa felt like the world had shifted under his feet at this tiny glimpse of his face, as if he was finally seeing himself the way Reki must see him.

“You look good,” Reki added, and then laughed awkwardly, sliding his hand to Langa’s back before dropping it. “Ah, but I bet you knew that.”

Langa did know. For the first time in his life he knew, he believed it, that he looked right, that he looked like himself. His throat filled up again, because even with everything that had happened in the past twelve hours, Reki had somehow managed to give Langa back a piece of himself.

“Thank you,” he managed, and he meant more than just the braid, god, he meant everything.

Chapter End Notes

hello hello hello!!!

anxiety and panic disorders have obviously become a central part of this fic, and it feels important to me to represent that mental health struggle responsibly. I never want to suggest that Langa is "broken" or that Reki will "fix" him, although I do believe that we often learn to love ourselves when other people who love us show us how. that being said, I am not perfect and neither is this fic! please continue to think critically about mental health rep in fiction :-)

and also: art! y'all really made me TEAR UP at the beautiful art of them in the ocean oml!! please see them at:

lightblue 8 on tumblr
lightgaze on tumblr
and bubun.ji on instagram.

also here is my insta in case i haven't linked to it yet! I post updates there sometimes haha. again, thank you all so much for your time and support, it means so much to me!! until next time ~~

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

hello friends! tw: in this chapter it is implied that Reki's dad would have been homophobic if he was still around. since homophobia is personally triggering for me, it will not feature much into this fic, but this chapter and the next will contain brief allusions to it. to skip, please pause reading at "Reki made a humming sound, rubbing at the sunburn on his nose" and ctrl+f a couple paragraphs down to "God, what if..."

thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Langa clung to Reki's hand all the way through the hotel, afraid they would run into Miguel, but they stumbled out into the muggy morning air without seeing anyone. The streets were chilly from the leftover rain, so they bought hot coffees at the convenience store by the station, Langa's cold hands fumbling on the money. Then they waited, huddling up together, for the train to come.

Langa kept shivering, but he clung to the feeling of the chilly air on the back of his neck, his hair lifted away from the skin by the braid. Somehow he felt like people must be looking at him and seeing someone different than usual, someone closer to the way Langa imagined himself, and it was a strange feeling, strange but good. Reki finished his coffee and crumpled the cup, stealing a sip of Langa's.

When the train arrived, they snuggled into a seat in the back, pressed up against the window just as rain began to fall outside. Reki lay his head against Langa's shoulder, and Langa's heart thumped in his chest, because he could feel Reki's warm cheek, the way Reki breathed out against him.

He had thought — he had thought maybe Reki wouldn't want to touch so much, anymore, now he knew that Langa was gay. He swallowed, his fingers already twitching to hold Reki's hand, which was settled on his thigh, his knuckles raw and sunburnt and solid. What if Reki would still allow Langa to spoon with him at night, maybe even kiss him a little bit in the dark? What if Reki would maybe allow Langa to mumble some of the other things he liked about him, twisting their hands together under the blankets with a blush high on his face, things like *you're really cute when you're embarrassed* or *kissing you sorta feels like heaven* or *I like the way your clothes smell* ?

“Hey,” said Reki, nudging their feet together. “Can I ask you something?” He cleared his throat. “Uh, but it might be kinda embarrassing.”

Langa swallowed again. He could feel the warmth of Reki’s body bleeding into his side, the ticklish brush of Reki’s leg hair against his thigh. “Uh-huh,” he said.

“When did you know that, uh.” Reki smushed his face into Langa’s shoulder. “Sorry! Ugh. It’s too personal.”

Langa could feel the flush beginning to creep up his neck, partly because of the way Reki was touching him, their feet bumping together, but also because he had a feeling he knew what Reki wanted to ask. He had never really talked about being gay with anybody before, and it was hard to swallow down the warm shyness, but he managed to say, “What? You can ask it.”

Reki shuffled his feet, bumping them against Langa’s ankles again. “I just wanted to know… like, how did you know, uh, you know, like when did you know you liked guys?”

Langa tucked his hands between his thighs, trying to swallow again. The train was so quiet and rumbling in the early morning, and Reki’s voice was awkward but soft, and what if he was asking because...because maybe he had begun to like kissing Langa, maybe a little too much? The little flame of hope in Langa’s chest grew a flicker stronger, warm against his heart, and he pressed the smallest bit closer to Reki, feeling Reki snuggle deeper into his shoulder.

“I’m not sure,” Langa said, and oh, this was a bit embarrassing to talk about, wasn’t it? Especially with Reki, the only boy Langa liked, the only person Langa dreamed of holding, in his soft brightly colored hoodies and his hair that smelled like Langa’s shampoo. Langa swallowed again. “It wasn’t a big moment, really? I pretended...I pretended to marry a boy on the playground once when I was little.”

He could feel Reki grin against him. “Really?”

Langa nodded. “I don’t remember it that well,” he admitted. “But my mom has pictures.”

Reki made an *ah* sound in his throat and lifted his head, rubbing at his mouth, and when Langa glanced at him, he felt his neck flush even warmer because god. Reki was so close, and his skin was so rough and textured from the sunburn, and Langa wanted to know what the sunburn would feel like under his lips. He curled his toes in his sandals. God, would Reki let him kiss him again? Just once? Maybe even just on the cheek, he wanted to kiss Reki’s cheek, he wanted to cup Reki’s face in his hands and press his mouth to that sunburn.

“So your mom knows?” Reki asked, and Langa cleared his throat, trying to drag his mind back to the conversation.

“Um…yeah,” he said. Langa’s dad had also known, and one summer his parents brought him to a pride parade, with so many bright colors that Langa’s head had spun. Reki made a humming sound, rubbing at the sunburn on his nose.

“That’s good,” he said, and then made a face. “I’m glad you didn’t have *my* dad, then, he would’ve…”

He trailed off, and Langa’s stomach clenched, because he didn’t need to hear the end of that sentence. This, at least, was something he understood, and even though it was awful, the little flame of hope flickered again. Maybe Reki understood, too, what it was like to hide a part of yourself, just in case it upset somebody. It was too much to hope for, Reki liking boys too, so Langa tried to smother the flame, pressing his hands more tightly between his thighs, but it refused to go out completely.

God, what if…

Reki cleared his throat. “So,” he said, and Langa tried to force himself to stop thinking about Reki snuggling against him again and whispering that he had liked Langa all along, that he wanted to keep kissing him more and more. “So, is that guy, uh, is that, like, your type? Like, tall and dark and mysterious or whatever?”

There was something in his voice — something a little strained. Langa swallowed again. He didn't want to talk about Miguel, the way he had once found Miguel handsome, a face he could stare at for hours, a face he had already forgotten once again. Maybe someday he would forget Reki's face, too. Langa clenched his hands in his lap, trying desperately to shove that thought away.

"Um," Langa said. "I...maybe?" It was a lie, but what was he supposed to say? That his type was boys with big smiles and scratchy singing voices and red hair blurring by on skateboards?

Reki made a face, kicking his legs up against the seat back in front of them, snuggling deeper into Langa's side again. "But why, man?" he said, and god, Langa had to swallow again, because it almost sounded like a whine, like Reki was frustrated, the strained thing in his voice again. "I mean, like, you deserve way better than that. Like, I bet you could find somebody way better than him. And you're out of his league, too."

Langa's face was so warm. "Stop," he said, and Reki turned to him, his nose scrunched up, and Langa's cheeks itched, because god the sunburn was so bright and red on Reki's face, and he almost looked embarrassed, and he was so cute that Langa wanted to die.

"It's true," Reki said, huffing out a breath, looking at his feet again. "You're out of everybody's league."

Langa felt so warm he didn't know what to do with himself, with his sweaty hands, with his flushed face. Reki had said these things so many times, that Langa was handsome, that he was attractive, but it had never felt true until today. The wispy pieces of hair were falling gently out of the braid that Reki had done so lovingly, and it made Langa feel sort of fuzzy inside. He pushed lightly at Reki's shoulder, just to have something to do with his hands, and then Reki pushed back, huffing out a laugh.

"You're so freaking red," Reki said, thumbing at Langa's cheek, and Langa swallowed hard, flushing again. Reki's hand lingered there for a moment before he shoved it back into his lap, laughing again, a little strained, a little high-pitched. "I mean the sunburn, that's all, that's all I meant! You got a *lot* of sun."

“Does it look bad?” Langa asked, and hastily Reki was shaking his head, his hair flopping around.

“No! No, of course not.” He snuggled back down, against Langa’s side, mumbling something Langa couldn’t hear.

“What?”

Reki settled his head against Langa’s shoulder again. “I just said, when we go to school on Monday I bet everybody’s gonna ask you where you went. And you can say you were with me.” He gave another strained laugh. “Man, everybody would be so jealous of me if they knew.”

“If they knew what?”

“Nothing,” said Reki, “nothing,” and he poked Langa’s arm, but then he raised his head a little. “I just mean the practice date, ‘cause like, they all wanna date you, y’know? And you could have gone to the carnival with any of them, but you went with me.”

Langa’s mouth was dry, because god, of course he had gone with Reki, why would he want to go with anybody else? “You’re my favorite person,” Langa managed to say, clumsily, because Reki had said that last night and Langa deserved the chance to say it, too, and Reki buried his face in Langa’s shoulder.

“Okay, okay,” Reki said, blindly shoving at Langa’s arm again, and then leaving his hand there, his palm hot against Langa’s skin. Langa squirmed against him, because god, he could feel the flush on Reki’s face, and what if Reki liked being Langa’s favorite person, just as much as Langa liked being his? What if...his breath stuck in his throat...what if Reki wanted them to keep being each other’s favorite people for a long time? And then Reki muttered, “Thanks,” into the warm space between their bodies and Langa’s heart thumped.

“You’re welcome,” Langa said, and then added, “It’s true.”

Reki muttered something else. He kept his face hidden for a few minutes as the train swayed around a curve, and Langa gazed down at the top of his head, at his frizzy hair flopping over the headband. He wanted to bury his fingers in that hair, and he lifted his hand and then hesitated, lowering it again, and then, and then he thought, why not? Last night, Reki had said Langa was brave, so Langa should be brave.

He slid his fingers into Reki's hair, and Reki shifted against him, and for a few minutes Langa was allowed to pet his head, marveling in the warmth of Reki's face against his shoulder.

"You wanna stay over next weekend?" Reki mumbled against him, pulling at a loose thread on his shorts. "My sisters are going to my grandma's, so it'll be quiet. I know you like when it's quiet."

Langa's hand paused in Reki's hair. "Okay," he said, his heart beginning to thump again, and he tried to tell himself, *don't misunderstand, don't misunderstand, don't misunderstand.* "And you can do my literature homework?"

Reki laughed a little, tugging at the thread until it pulled away from his shorts, nudging Langa. "Well, okay," he said. The train swayed around a curve, and Reki's fingers found Langa's, in the dip between their thighs. Langa's breath stuck in his throat as Reki tangled their fingers together, pressing his warm palm to Langa's. They stayed that way for a long time, and Langa could feel the thrumming heartbeat in Reki's hand, the same heartbeat as Langa's own.

For a while he was pretty sure Reki had fallen asleep, so he lay his own cheek against the top of his head and breathed in. Reki smelled like the hotel, the same as Langa. They were the same. Langa breathed out, and then Reki's phone lit up in his lap, and Reki mumbled a little, pushing the phone into Langa's lap.

"Can you turn off my reminders?" Reki muttered, and Langa picked his phone up clumsily, opening the reminders. *Make sure Langa gets water!!!! The crying tires him out,* the top one read, and Langa felt his cheeks heat up. God. He fumbled with the phone while he rubbed his itchy palm against his shorts. He had ugly-sobbed all over Reki's pajama shirt, and Reki had still written something sweet about it in his phone.

Langa picked up the phone again. He knew he shouldn't read through Reki's reminders, where he always wrote down all his random thoughts and ideas, but Reki had practically handed him the phone, and Langa just, he just wanted to see if any of the other reminders were about him. What if Reki had written something like, *figure out if I like boys (because I like Langa)* ? What if he had written, *invite Langa over for the weekend so we can make out* ? What if he had written —

Langa's thumb was already scrolling when he paused, his stomach going cold as he stared at one of the reminders.

Ideas for when I have a girlfriend! Reki had written, one month ago today.

Langa sucked in his cheeks, pressing his toes tightly to the floor. Reki mumbled against his shoulder, snuggling closer, and even though he was warm, so warm, Langa's fingers felt cold and numb. He knew he should stop scrolling. He knew, but he was already reading the words underneath, a clumsy list with several spelling errors:

— *go to S*

— *show off my skating skills*

— *hold hands a lot. like a lot*

— *maybe kiss*

— *buy clothes for each other and look at each other in them*

— *call her baby a lot (think of other pet names too, just one isn't good enough)*

Langa placed the phone carefully back in his lap. Then he pressed his shaking hand to the top of Reki's, willing his throat not to close up, his stomach not to clench, so cold, so cold, because, oh. Oh. All these things Reki had been doing with Langa, the hand-holding, the buying each other clothes, the *baby...* they were all things Reki wanted to do with a girl. With his girlfriend. Because of course he would get a girlfriend, someday soon, probably.

Langa shut his eyes tightly and swallowed, hard. He had forgotten about the person in their class who Reki liked.

God. There was no way it was Langa. He had been silly to imagine that, Reki whispering *I like you* into the nape of Langa's neck, snuggling against him in his bed, calling him *baby* over and over again until the sound of it filled up Langa's throat, until Langa was allowed to wiggle with excitement against him and hear Reki laugh, so happy and full of love. Langa swallowed again, pressing his feet into the train floor. He remembered to squint his eyes open long enough to turn off Reki's phone, and then he slumped against him, his cheek smushed to the top of Reki's hair.

It hurt, not being what Reki wanted. It hurt so much, but Langa focused on his breathing, on getting enough air, and eventually the pain began to ease, just until it was manageable.

Reki was staring at Langa, really intensely, in the middle of their history class.

Langa could feel himself sweating. Their teacher had put them in small study groups to prepare for the final exams, and Reki was sitting a few aisles over, in a different group. There was no reason for him to be staring at Langa. Langa rubbed at the sweat on the back of his neck, shifting, trying not to flush so obviously that people would notice.

This had been happening all week. Reki had been touching him more, too, although sneakily, like he thought Langa wouldn't notice Reki's hand on his leg, or his thumb brushing food away from Langa's cheek. Langa's body flushed so warm every time he did it, stiflingly warm. *What are you doing,* he wanted to plead, *why are you touching me so much, don't you know I'm going to misunderstand? Don't you know that now, more than ever?*

Langa tried to swallow, rubbing his sweaty hands on his uniform pants, trying to focus on his study partner instead of Reki's eyes boring holes in the side of his head.

As soon as class let out, Reki came barreling over, grabbing Langa's backpack off the desk and hoisting it over his own shoulder. Langa swallowed again, the flush still creeping up his neck as he stood up. Reki looked sort of flustered, and he kept glancing around at Langa's study group as they milled around the aisles, gathering books.

“What?” said Langa, when Reki didn’t say anything. He could feel sweat trickling down his side, and he clasped his elbows with his hands, trying not to stare at the colorful bandaid plastered over Reki’s nose. “Give me back my backpack.”

“I want to carry it,” Reki said immediately, and then he kicked lightly at the side of Langa’s foot, pointing to a guy from his study group. “Was that Enmei? Were you talking to him?”

Langa glanced at the classroom door, where everyone was trying to crowd into the hallway at the same time, and shook his head, confused. “I — maybe? We were trying to figure out the name of that one dynasty where…”

“Do you like him?” Reki asked, and Langa flushed, suddenly warmer than before, clasping his elbows more tightly.

“What? No.” Jesus, this was the third time this week that Reki had asked this same question out of nowhere. Was he so desperate to find Langa a boyfriend? But then why did he look so strung-up and agitated about it, both of his legs bouncing? Langa was so horribly confused.

“Do you think he’s cute?” asked Reki. “He looks like your type, right? On my list of all the guys in our class who are your type, he was right at the top, and he was sitting so close to—”

“Your list of *what* ?”

God, Langa was going to die.

Reki looked at him and made a face. He looked flushed, too, his hands clenched tight on his and Langa’s backpack straps. “Nothing,” he said, and then he grabbed Langa’s arm hastily and tugged him toward the door. “Let’s go skate!”

Langa stumbled over his feet as he hurried to keep up with him, out of the school and down the steps and onto their boards, the ground racing away underneath them. The air was hot on Langa’s face and Reki’s hand was sweaty on his wrist, still holding onto him as both

backpacks bounced against his sides, and Langa felt so warm, so warm and so flustered and so confused. Why did Reki have a list of the boys in class who were Langa's type? And how did he not realize that *he* was Langa's type? He had caught Langa gazing wide-eyed at his mouth in class one too many times, and Langa had frozen and blushed every time, and still Reki only gave him finger guns or funny faces when it happened. It didn't make sense; nothing made sense.

They screeched to a stop in front of DopeSketch, catching their breath, and Reki slumped against the storefront while he dug in his bag for his water bottle. "You gonna stay for my shift?" he gasped, between breaths, chugging water, and Langa choked a little at the way water ran down the corner of Reki's mouth, dripping onto his neck. He swallowed hard.

"I want to," Langa said, which was true. He wanted to, badly. He wanted to sit at the counter across from Reki and listen to him chatter about skateboard parts, he wanted to stare at the way the pink of the DopeSketch shirt brought out the pretty flush in Reki's skin. He scuffed at his board with his foot. "But my mom wants me to come home so I can help her grocery shop." He tried not to think about Yua visiting Reki at the shop while he was gone. God. He rolled the board more quickly, back and forth and back and forth.

Reki glanced down at the board and then back up to Langa's face. "Aww," he said, sounding genuinely sad about it, and then he reached out and clumsily punched Langa's arm, clearing his throat. "You're not lying, right? Like, you're not going on a secret date without telling me?"

Langa's face flushed warm again, and his palms itched, because, because why would Reki ask that? And why did he sound so… so… so put out about it? Before he could stop himself, Langa heard himself say, "Why are you being weird about—" a hasty swallow — "about me liking boys? Are you, are you uncomfortable with it?"

Reki bounced off the wall immediately, his eyes wide, dropping the water bottle onto the ground as he grabbed at Langa's arms. "No!" he said, so fast, his words tripping over themselves, "No, no, Langa, dude, of course not! No! No, I'm not — I'm just — I'm just — ah," he choked out a half-laugh, his face red. "Sorry, dude. I guess I'm just feeling sorta jealous about it? I just keep thinking, man, Langa could probably date anybody he wanted, so probably pretty soon he's gonna get a boyfriend, and then, and then, and then y'know."

Langa's mouth was dry. Reki's thumbs were pushing against the sleeves of his button-down, and Langa had to swallow again, and then again, because he wanted to feel Reki's hands on his bare skin. "And then what?"

Reki glanced away, his cheeks flushed, squeezing Langa's arms. "And then, y'know, you probably won't wanna... hang out with me so much," he said. "You'll like him better than — argh! It's so stupid. It's freakin' stupid man, it's just, it's just I know you're gonna like him better than me and it just, it just sucks and I'm being stupid and I'm sorry, crap, sorry." He huffed out a breath, letting go of Langa, rubbing at his neck with one hand and then the other as Langa swallowed, trying to put his racing thoughts into words.

"No," he said, the only word that would connect from his brain to his mouth, and Reki glanced at him again, his eyes squinting up. "No," Langa repeated, because god, how could he ever like anybody better than Reki? Even if they could only be friends forever, Langa would want them to grow old by each other's sides, maybe in houses with those connected backyards so he could see Reki out on his porch each morning and each evening. "No, you're my — you're my favorite person."

Reki made a face again, his embarrassed face, the one he did when Langa was telling him something good about himself that he didn't fully believe. Langa was seized with the sudden urge to break down those walls, to grab Reki and tell him how much he liked him, over and over again until the words made sense in Reki's brain.

"We're always going to hang out," Langa said, because he couldn't say the other things he wanted to say, *I love you* and *Can we please spend all summer together and hold hands some more and take naps on your bedroom floor?* "I mean—I mean as long as you want to."

"I want to," Reki said, face red, kicking at Langa's board a little. "Okay! Sorry. Gah. I'm always getting all worked up over stupid stuff." He rubbed at his face, and Langa wanted to catch Reki's wrists in his hands and tell him it wasn't stupid, to be insecure, even though he had nothing to be insecure about, because Langa would always like him best of all. But then Reki dropped his hand and said, sort of shamefaced, "You should hang out with other boys if you want to, though. I mean, I mean you shouldn't hang back from the dating scene just 'cause of me."

Langa swallowed. "Okay," he said, and he knew he should say it back, that Reki could hang out with girls if he wanted, but for some reason he didn't say it. He just. He just didn't want

to.

“Cool,” said Reki, and then he rubbed at his elbow and glanced to the side. “Cool, cool cool cool, except, except don’t make plans tomorrow, right? ‘Cause you’re coming over to my house, right? And I have something to show you. Except — ah.” He cleared his throat, rubbing his shoulder. “You have to promise not to laugh when I show you. Okay. Okay, okay I need to — to — to get to work! Ah. Yeah.”

“Wait,” said Langa, as Reki dumped his backpack in his arms, scrambling to get his skateboard off the ground. “What are you going to show me?” But Reki just gave him a clumsy grin and finger guns and hurried into DopeSketch, the door jingling loudly behind him, leaving Langa on the sidewalk with his heart in his throat.

He tried to shake himself, sliding his backpack on slowly. Nothing made sense, and he still felt sweaty all over, but at least he could still cling to the daydream about growing old in their backyards together. As he skated home, he imagined a couple of dogs into the daydream, big dogs that would run around with Reki, big enough for Reki’s loud laugh and fast legs and big, big heart.

Langa’s mom asked to brush his hair that night. It was a strange request; she hadn’t brushed his hair since the weeks after his dad died, when Langa had stayed in bed for days on end and forgotten to shower. But Langa settled on the floor in front of her anyway, his head against her knee, listening to the dishwasher running, and she said, “I saw you with that nice braid in your hair when you came home from your trip, did you — did you do that yourself?”

Langa closed his eyes, focusing on the quiet, rhythmic sounds of the apartment, the soothing scrape of the brush against his scalp. “Reki did it for me,” he said, quietly.

“Oh,” his mom said, and then coughed a little. “I thought so! What a nice boy.”

“It was really nice,” Langa agreed.

“If you want,” she began, and then she coughed again. Langa knew his mom still felt nervous talking to him, sometimes, so he leaned more heavily against her knee, pressing close. “If you want, I can braid it again,” she said. “You really have such lovely hair. Ah, but you probably don’t want your mom doing something silly like that, do you?”

Langa wrinkled his nose. It was warm and cozy in the apartment, the windows open, and he didn’t think it was silly, his mom brushing her hair. Maybe they should touch like this more often, him and his mom. It was comforting. “Can you?” he asked.

“Oh, baby,” said his mom. He heard her set the brush down, and then her fingers were brushing against his forehead again, gathering up the hair. “I’ll do it anytime you want, okay? I missed this.”

Her voice was soft, but not sad; she didn’t say what she missed, but Langa understood anyway. He nuzzled closer to her knee as she began to tuck the pieces of the braid together, more gently than Reki, and without all the bouncing. He breathed out, slow and content. He had missed this, too, being close to his mom, feeling how much she loved him, the kind of love that didn’t need explaining, because it had always been a part of them, and maybe it would be a part of them forever and forever.

“How was the rest of your trip?” she asked, then, and Langa shivered against her, before he could stop himself. Her hands stilled. “Oh, honey. Did everything go okay?”

Langa meant to say yes. But then her hand touched his cheek, so lightly, and Langa’s throat filled up, remembering the fear of pressing against the ice machine, trying to get away, to *get away* and before he knew it he was choking out, “No,” and then he was crying, all of a sudden, the rush of emotions crashing over him like a wave, huge and overwhelming and painful, and he had to press his face to his mom’s skirt, warm and silky around her legs.

“Honey,” said his mom, alarmed, touching his shoulders, and Langa dragged his legs up to his chest and sobbed against her, shaking, her hands fluttering around before finally settling in his hair again, soothing him, whispering words of comfort in English and Japanese and a language that might be both of them, or neither, a language without words and Langa cried until, just as suddenly, the tears dried up, like a spring shower blowing through the warm nighttime, and he rubbed at his face with his sleeves.

“Oh, love,” said his mom. “Here, here.” She gathered tissues from the box on the coffee table and handed them to him, and Langa blew his nose, several times, rubbing his eyes. Then he heaved out a breath and settled against her knee again, keeping his eyes closed, exhausted from the crying. He had been crying so much lately. He was ready for it to end.

His mom was still petting his hair, the dishwasher rumbling in the quiet, among the sound of cars going by outside. “Honey,” she said, a while later, the worry heavy in her voice. “What happened? Can you tell me?”

Langa leaned heavily against her, pressing his cheek to her skirt. His body was so tired, and he wasn’t sure he would ever have the words to explain, or the strength; the anxiety felt like a huge, looming thing in front of him, too big to ever get over. But then his mom added, very very softly, “Please, baby?” and Langa felt the air leave his lungs, a long and shaky breath.

And he told her.

He told her everything. His throat hurt, at first, as he told her about Miguel and the trip to Japan, about the hand holding and the failed kiss back in Canada. He told her about his eyes, about the way his vision blurred sometimes, he told her about the mixer and he told her about the mall and he told her about the ice machine, he told her about the panic, he told her about the terrifying feeling he had sometimes, like he was dying, and how he had to keep on living while it was happening, somehow.

“It’s hard,” he mumbled against her, and she wrapped her arms around his body, squeezing him so hard that Langa screwed his eyes shut. If he wasn’t broken already, she would break him, he thought, with how tightly she held him, her breathing uneven as if she was trying to hold back her own tears, as if she was trying to be strong for him. Langa squeezed her arms. He wanted to say thank you, but he wasn’t sure how, and then she loosened her grip and kissed his hair and said, in a wobbly voice,

“Love, my love. I know it’s hard. Of course it’s hard. Oh, my love,” and Langa could feel his eyes welling up with tears again, his throat going tight and raw because oh, oh, oh, oh she understood. He had to press his eyes to her knee to stop himself from crying again. It felt overwhelming, raw in his bones, to have somebody understand this horrible part of him, the panic that he tried so hard to hide, and her hands were so kind and gentle as she stroked his arms, crying quietly to herself.

Finally the pressure in Langa's throat eased, and he was able to lift his head again, wiping the tears off his face. Maybe he should be embarrassed, to be crying to his mother like this, and maybe he would be, in the morning. Right now he just felt achy and trembly, and he wanted to sleep for a long time.

He felt his mom pick up the braid again, trying to twist it back together, and Langa asked, in a raw voice, "What should I...what should I do?"

"Baby," she said, "baby." She tugged gently on the hair, her breathing labored, and for a while he thought maybe that was her answer, that maybe there was nothing to be done, that he just had to accept the way he was and try to live that way. But then she tied off the end of the braid and wrapped her arms around him again, hugging him more gently this time, and said, "You don't need to do anything by yourself, baby. This is bigger than you. Oh, my love."

Langa swallowed, and he meant to say something, but he wasn't sure what, and then she laid her cheek to the top of his head, briefly, and he felt her words more than heard them when she said,

"I'm going to help you through this, okay, baby?"

And he had to swallow again, squeezing his eyes shut, before he could nod. He had never known how to ask for help before. He had always been too afraid, and he was afraid now, his throat aching, his hands trembly, but he wasn't alone and maybe he could be safe, even when he was afraid. He gripped at her arms, hugging himself, and slowly the pain in his chest began to drain away, into the soft sounds of the dishwasher, the creaking of the floorboards above them, and his mom's breathing, soft and shaky, the same as his own.

What's the surprise? Langa texted Reki the next day, but Reki just texted back,

Ahahaha

Hah

It's not a surprise

Stop, dude!

You're just gonna be let down if you think it's something big

It's nothing

Stop

Stop thinking whatever you're thinking

Langa put his phone away, trying to concentrate on his lunch, but he couldn't. What was he supposed to be thinking? Maybe Reki had built him a new board. But, no, Langa had seen his garage workspace just the other day — Reki was making training wheels for his baby sister's bike. Maybe he wanted to practice something new? Langa gulped down his ice water and pushed his chair back, trying not to think about that, but, but. There were so many things they hadn't practiced, his brain kept reminding him, they hadn't kissed each other's necks, they had never given anyone a hickey, oh god, oh god what if Reki wanted to —

Langa swallowed hard, hurrying over to the sink and dunking his dishes under cold, cold water. He stared at the running water, trying not to imagine Reki, his neck all flushed and red, little kiss marks and bites bruising the skin, marks from *Langa,* from Langa's mouth and Langa's teeth and Langa had to drop his head, breathing hard, his hands braced against the sink.

Jesus. Jesus, Reki was going to kill him.

He rushed through all of his chores, dumping his unfolded clothes into his closet, and then grabbed his overnight bag and jogged out of the apartment. He barely managed to fumble out a text to Reki as he hurried down the stairs. *I'm coming over,* he sent, and right away Reki's responding emoji popped up, a thumbs-up. Langa swallowed, banging the door open his his shoulder, his heart thumping as he stared at the screen. He was being stupid. He was being stupid. There was nothing romantic about a thumbs-up, Reki probably wanted to show him a new skating magazine. Reki probably wanted to show him the popsicles he had smuggled from his sisters. Reki probably wanted—

Another text popped up.

<3

Langa tripped on the sidewalk.

By the time he reached Reki's house, Langa was a sweaty, out-of-breath mess, his face red from half-running the whole way there, his mind crowded full of images of getting to kiss Reki again, getting to touch his face, oh god, of Reki sitting on his kitchen countertop and wrapping his legs around Langa's waist. He knocked on the door and then slumped against the wall, trying to catch his breath.

He was going crazy. He was *crazy,* but he couldn't help it. Reki had invited him over when nobody would be home and hinted at a surprise, and Langa was just, he was just a mess. His throat was all raw from the run and his heart was pounding and his head was full of Reki, Reki's bandaged hands, Reki's round cheeks, Reki's strained embarrassed laugh —

The door cracked open. Reki poked his head out, and Langa's heart throbbed. Reki's face was kind of red and blushy, but he was grinning, and god, god he was so handsome. Langa stood up unsteadily, trying to catch his breath, and Reki said,

"Don't laugh!"

and then Langa saw it, through the crack in the door, even though Reki was obviously trying to hide. His words died in his mouth, his heart pausing before it began to pound again, double-time, thudding painfully against his ribs because oh god oh god oh god.

Reki opened the door wider. He was wearing a crop top.

Langa tried to swallow. But he couldn't. His face was so hot and his lungs were hot and the air all around him was hot, because god, because god Reki looked like summer incarnated,

his skin bright and red and warm in the orange shirt. It was cut off a few inches above his shorts, only the top half of a bright printed sun remaining, and there were so many loose threads and so many colors and Langa's hands, twitched, hot.

God. Jesus. Oh god.

Reki gave a nervous sort of laugh, leaning his head against the doorframe, and hastily Langa tore his eyes away from the ragged hem of the shirt. "I told you it wasn't really a surprise," Reki said. "I just wanted to wear one 'cause you stole the other one I got at the mall. Thief."

Langa stared at him. God, his mouth was so dry. He had never in a million years imagined that *this* could be the surprise, god, this was so much better than anything he had imagined and so much worse, so much worse because god how could Reki look so good? He had looked so good before and now, now *this.* Now Langa could see the warm freckled skin on his stomach, the softness of his sides underneath the loose hem and Langa had to ball his hands up, trying to take a breath, trying to *breathe.*

"I didn't steal it," he managed.

"Yeah-huh," said Reki, but then he stepped back and held the door open wider, and god, Langa's eyes darted down to his stomach and he had to swallow again at the little crease above Reki's belly button. He stepped clumsily inside as Reki said, "It's okay, this one's more me anyway."

Langa tried to swallow. God. It was so bright and sunny in Reki's living room, all the windows open, curtains fluttering and Reki was so bright and colorful and how had he found a shirt that matched him so perfectly? It looked like the shirt was hugging Reki's skin, like it was melting against him, and Langa finally managed to swallow before he said, "Where — where did you get it?"

Reki glanced down at himself. "Ah — I made it," he said, and then he laughed a little, tugging at the hem. "It's one of my mom's old t-shirts that she was saving for my sisters, but I stole it. Don't tell her."

“She doesn’t — know?”

Reki shook his head, grabbing Langa’s elbow, and god, god his palm was so warm and Langa tripped over his own feet as Reki tugged him into the kitchen. “She’s gone until tomorrow,” he said. “I wouldn’t wear this around her! She’d probably think I was crazy or something.”

Langa swallowed again, catching at the counter as Reki grabbed a cookbook out of the cabinets. Reki had said he wanted to bake, since his mom never allowed him in the kitchen when she was home, but how was Langa supposed to concentrate on following directions when Reki was so beautiful? He had to swallow again, because he felt sort of clumsy and too big next to Reki, who had all these little scrapes and scars littered all over his body, and, and, and Langa could see the dimples in his back when he twisted around, and the soft dips in his sides, and the freckles along his spine and god Langa’s hands were itching so bad.

He wanted to hug Reki. He wanted to hug him so badly. How would Reki’s skin feel under his hands? God, it was too much to think about, wrapping his arms around Reki and holding him close and pressing his clumsy awkward hands to Reki’s warm sides, feeling Reki laugh breathlessly against him. Reki looked more like himself than ever before, as if he was finally expressing some part of his soul, and god, he was *so pretty* and Langa's chest was so hot and his throat was hot and he wanted to hug Reki *so badly.*

Reki was busy cracking the eggs into the bowl, and he wasn’t looking at Langa, but there was this little flush on his face, high up on his cheeks. He cleared his throat, nudging Langa’s ankle with his toes. “You’re staring,” he said, and Langa jumped, guilty, face going hot.

“Sorry,” he blurted, and then, god, no, he should have denied it, he should have denied it but it was too late and his face was burning. Reki glanced at him, his cheeks tinged red, and he gave Langa this little smile, sort of hesitant, that made Langa’s heart squeeze.

God.

“D’you like it?” Reki asked, rubbing his hair out of his face with the back of his hand, shifting his weight. “I mean, like — I thought it looked sort of cool. It looks like *me* , y’know?”

Langa nodded, his mouth dry. Okay. Okay, Reki wasn't uncomfortable, maybe he even sort of...maybe he liked Langa staring at him, and Langa had to swallow, his cheeks even warmer. "It fits you," he said, awkwardly, and Reki gave him a clumsy grin, kicking at his ankle again. Langa wanted to touch the bright fabric of Reki's sleeve, he wanted to press his palm there and feel the warmth of Reki's skin bleeding through the orange and the red and he had to swallow again, trying to force down the blush.

Reki scrambled around the kitchen, grabbing ingredients, nearly knocking over a plant on the windowsill when he reached for the flour, and Langa had to look away hastily at the way the t-shirt rode up over Reki's ribs. And then Reki started chattering about S, about how Shadow had "chickened out" of their last beef, and Langa nodded along, still feeling hot and sweaty in his clothes, his t-shirt caught uncomfortably under his armpits. It was just, it was just that Reki looked so happy and confident, hurrying around the kitchen, patches of sun bright and yellow on every part of his body, his dimples deep in his cheeks as he pressed close to Langa's arm to show him how to pour the batter into the cupcake holders.

"You got it?" Reki asked, grinning up at him, and Langa's heart stuttered, and he tried to nod. Reki looked pleased, pushing the cupcake pan closer to him, and Langa swallowed, because god, of course Reki should feel good and confident and comfortable, of course he should, but it wasn't *fair* because Langa was stuffed so full of things he wanted to *tell* him. He wanted to kneel down and smush his cheek against Reki's sunwarm stomach and kiss him there and mumble all the compliments crowding up in his brain, that Reki looks so soft, so pretty, so *good* with his skin like a patchwork of colors and freckles and scrapes and god Langa wanted so badly to kiss every single one of them.

He tried to clear his throat. God. God, it was so warm inside the kitchen, and Reki put his hand on Langa's wrist to guide him as Langa clumsily poured the cupcake batter, and Langa couldn't focus on anything except the edges of Reki's bandaids brushing against his skin.

They baked the cupcakes (which turned out terrible) and then Reki wanted to show him this new skating documentary, and they ended up toppling onto the couch, the sunshine pooling into the living room. Reki was close enough to touch, babbling on about Tony Hawk, and Langa tried not to stare, but it was hard. The way Reki slouched against the cushions, pointing the remote at the TV, made his stomach crease around his navel and god. God. Langa could see the puckered scar from his appendix surgery and it made his mouth so dry, like he was seeing something special, something only a few people got to see, and he tried to watch the screen as Reki uploaded the documentary, but he couldn't focus.

God. He wanted to touch so badly. He wanted it so bad that he kept having to swallow, pressing his hands tightly between his thighs, even though his eyes kept drifting back to Reki, to the way he scratched at his shoulder and left the sleeve rucked up, exposing his sunburn, the way he stuck his legs out onto the ottoman, his hair soft and shiny in the sunshine, and god, god. Langa swallowed again. The shirt was so colorful. It looked so good on him. Langa wanted to bury his face in Reki's chest and worship him forever.

"You good, dude?" asked Reki, glancing over at him, his mouth still pulled into a grin. "You're kinda quiet."

Langa pressed his hands more tightly between his thighs, his face heating up. "I—yeah," he said, trying not to look at Reki's pretty freckled skin, the patch of hair on his stomach in the light. God. God. Langa had to swallow and look away. Reki was just wearing what made him comfortable, that was all, and he looked so good and cool and happy and relaxed, just hanging out on the couch with his friend. Langa shouldn't think about touching his sides, he shouldn't think about how warm Reki's skin would feel under his fingertips.

"You sure?" asked Reki, and he reached over the couch cushions, laying his hand on Langa's arm, and Langa's chest flushed warm, so warm. Reki rubbed his arm a little, with his thumb, and god, Langa was going to die, Langa was going to die if Reki started touching him because it was already so hard to hold back. He just wanted so badly to hug Reki, to flatten his palms along the ragged hem of Reki's cut-off t-shirt, and then Reki added, "It's okay for you to talk, y'know. But only if you want to."

Langa swallowed and then, and then, because he couldn't stop himself, he blurted out, "I really like your shirt."

Reki's eyebrows went up, and he glanced down at himself, tugging at the hem of his shirt, sitting up a little so his stomach wouldn't crease. "Oh," he said, and then he laughed a little, embarrassed, rubbing at the bandaid on his nose, where he had accidentally scratched the sunburn to bleeding. "Really? I — I sorta thought — I don't know. I sorta thought maybe you would think it was cool, since you looked so cool wearing yours, and, and I don't know. You really like it?"

Langa nodded, a little desperate, his hands twitching, and Reki glanced at his face again and grinned. His smile was still a bit hesitant, but it was soft, like maybe he was beginning to

believe it, the things Langa had always wanted him to believe, that he looked good, that Langa liked looking at him.

Reki rubbed his thumb carefully over Langa's arm. Langa thought he was going to fall apart, breathless, with how gently Reki was touching him, with all the straining effort of holding himself back from touching Reki's hand in return.

"I was just thinking," Reki said, and then gave an awkward laugh, glancing down at the space between them and scratching at his knee. "I was just thinking, like, how my dad would be so annoyed with me if he saw me, y'know, with all my scars and the stupid nail polish and everything. Like, I was just thinking, y'know, what would he say if I ran into him like this, and, and yeah."

He huffed out another laugh, but it wasn't the happy confident laugh from earlier, and Langa's stomach clenched. Carefully, so carefully, he extracted his own hand from between his knees and settled it on Reki's arm, careful not to touch anywhere Reki might want not him to touch, trying his absolute hardest not to look at Reki's stomach.

"He would see that you're happy," Langa said, trying to keep his voice steady, because Reki should hear this, he should know. "And that you're still being yourself, and, and and you're doing good, without him, you're happier without him." He squeezed Reki's arm and then added, "And probably he would be jealous."

Reki laughed again, rubbing his mouth, dropping his hand onto his lap. "Okay," he said, but the happy sort of glow had returned to his voice, and when he looked at Langa, his smile was soft, so soft that Langa's chest ached. God. God, Reki would be pretty even if the only thing Langa could see was his smile. "That reminds me. Your nail polish is coming off, isn't it? I saw it earlier."

"Oh," said Langa, a bit startled, because he had forgotten about his nail polish. He looked down at his hands, and his stomach clenched when he realized Reki was right. The polish was chipping off, almost entirely gone on most of his fingers. "You can — you can fix it, right?" he asked, a sort of panic going tight in his chest, because what if he had taken poor care of his nails? What if he had ruined all of Reki's hard work? And no, Langa wanted them to look the same, he wanted his hands to match Reki's pretty hands, he wanted —

“Of course,” said Reki, and he squeezed Langa’s arm. “It’s okay, dude, it’s supposed to come off after a while. Hang on. Lemme go get the bottle.”

He scrambled off the couch and hurried into the other room, and Langa sank back against the couch cushions, trying to steady his breathing. Reki was going to hold his hands again. Reki was going to hold his hands, and he was going to snuggle close on the couch, his knee pressed to Langa’s, and Langa was going to have to bite his tongue so hard to stop himself from blurting out how pretty he looked. He swallowed. God. God, god, god.

Reki came back and bounced onto the couch, and Langa sat up quickly, his heart throbbing. Reki scooted close and opened his fist to reveal two nail polish bottles, an orange one and a blue one. “Do you want to try a different color?” he asked. “‘Cause I can do the blue one if you want. It’ll match your hair, and stuff.”

Langa shifted. The blue looked nice, but… “I want to match with yours,” he said, and he knew how stupid it sounded, and his cheeks flushed, but he didn’t take the words back. Reki laughed a little, closing his fist.

“I’ll do mine the same color,” he said. “Okay?”

The tight thing in Langa’s chest relaxed, and he nodded. Reki tucked the orange nail polish away and uncapped the blue one, and then he hesitated, glancing up at Langa’s face.

“What?” asked Langa, nervous, when Reki didn’t say anything right away, and Reki made a face, scratching at his arm.

“It’s dumb,” he said.

“What?”

Reki dropped his hand. “I just,” he said, and then cleared his throat. “I was thinking, maybe, like, I could sit in your lap while I do it? So I can see what it’s like, ‘cause, ‘cause I’ve sorta

been thinking about it since the hotel, and I don't know, I don't know, it's just been on my mind, that's all."

Langa stared at him. God, his stomach was going hot. Reki wanted to sit in his lap? Reki wanted to sit on top of him, his thighs pressing against Langa's legs, Reki wanted to be that close to him? Langa swallowed with difficulty, and god, his mouth was dry, his mouth was so dry, and he could only stare helplessly at Reki, at the sunshine pooling around him, making the edges of his hair glow.

Something tugged at his mind. Reki had *liked* it, when Langa had sat in his lap, and Langa had to swallow again.

Reki had been *thinking* about this.

Langa's throat was so dry he thought he would never be able to speak, but he managed, "Okay," and Reki rubbed at his face, looking embarrassed. God, Langa was going to get to *touch* him, his warm body, and the anticipation crashed over him, breathless, just before Reki scrambled up and swung his leg clumsily over Langa's thighs, bracing his hand on Langa's shoulder. Langa barely managed to swallow again, hard, before Reki settled down on top of him, leaning back.

And, and, and oh, god. Reki was heavy, so heavy and warm, his thighs firm and fuzzy as they pressed against Langa's, and Langa's throat closed up, at the way the sun silhouetted Reki's. He could barely breathe, his heart thudding in his chest, and when Reki shifted, Langa could feel their sweaty skin sticking together, and he tried to swallow, but he couldn't because Reki felt so warm and soft and oh god, oh god. Langa tried to swallow again. God. Jesus. He had felt safe sitting in Reki's lap, but god, he felt even *safer* like this, sinking into the couch with Reki's warm weight on top of him, the cushions rising up on either side of their legs, and Reki cleared his throat.

"Am I too heavy?" he asked, and Langa could barely process the words before he was saying, quickly,

"No, I — I like it,"

and god, the way Reki looked down, scratching at his knee, his face red to the ears — it made Langa's heart swell up against his chest, too big to contain. Reki looked so good in his lap. It felt so comfortable, so *right,* as if Langa could come home every day for the rest of his life and collapse onto the couch this way, wrapping his arms around Reki's waist and burying his face in Reki's chest and breathing him in, smushed against the cushions, until they had both recharged from all the stress of everything.

God. Langa's heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest. Reki must — he must feel it too, right? What if he *liked* it?

Reki shifted again, his knees pressing snug against Langa's hips, and Langa's mouth went drier than ever. He stared up at Reki, and after a moment Reki met his eyes, and Langa felt his heart throb because *because* because the way Reki swallowed — the way he cleared his throat — the way he scratched at his knee again, god, god Langa felt like he was going to explode with all the things he wanted to say.

"Give me your hand?" Reki said, sort of a question but not really, and belatedly Langa remembered the nail polish. Flushing, he pulled his hands out of the couch and held them up, and Reki took the left one in his fingers, rolling his thumb over the knuckles. Langa swallowed, hovering his other hand awkwardly in the air, and Reki glanced down at it and then back at Langa's face. Carefully, he took Langa's other hand and guided it down to rest on his knee.

Langa swallowed again, harder. God. Reki's skin was so rough and warm under his palm, and Langa could feel his leg hair, and it was just as soft as he had always imagined it would be. Reki poked his tongue between his teeth in concentration as he began to paint Langa's thumb nail, and Langa tried not to stare at his mouth, except, except where else was he supposed to stare? He couldn't look at Reki's knee, or, or Reki's thighs with his shorts straining around them, so warm on top of Langa's thighs, or at Reki's waist — and oh, god, Reki's waist, the freckles, the faded scars, the threads of orange and gold getting caught in the crease of his stomach — Langa had to swallow hard again, squeezing Reki's knee. God. God, he shouldn't stare.

"You good?" asked Reki, still frowning down at the nails, concentrating so hard, and Langa tried to nod, but really he was having trouble thinking of anything than how badly he wanted to wrap his arms around Reki's pretty torso and drag him closer, until they were snuggled up together, Reki's cheek against his hair, humming contently. Instead he kept his hand tight on Reki's knee as Reki blew on his nails, holding up Langa's fingers to show him.

“Oh,” said Langa, and he had to clear his throat because it was so dry, so dry and Reki was so warm and heavy on top of him, and god he smelled good, he smelled like summer and home, “It’s...it’s nice.”

“Just nice?” Reki asked, raising his eyebrows, and Langa hastily cleared his throat again.

“I like the blue,” he said, because it was true, it did look nice but nothing could compare to the bright colors of Reki’s t-shirt, stretched across his chest, and Reki’s mouth pulled up on one side in a grin.

“Jeez, man, don’t sound so excited,” he said, placing Langa’s left hand carefully on his knee and picking up his other one, and Langa swallowed.

“Sorry,” he said, but Reki just breathed out a laugh, shaking his head, shifting around on his thighs again, his knees sinking deeper into the space between Langa’s hips and the couch cushions.

“S’cool, man,” he said, and Langa’s chest felt hot at the deep affection in his voice, in his smile, in the way he smoothed his thumb over Langa’s knuckles before he started to paint his nails. Reki looked so content, so comfortable, his shirt bright and orange against his sunburnt skin, so comfortable with Langa, so comfortable in Langa’s *lap,* and Langa had to swallow again and again to try to shove down the rising feeling in his chest.

It was just that Reki looked so happy, so much happier than yesterday, when he had sounded so fucked up over the thought of Langa leaving him for somebody else. Langa tried to fight against the swelling feeling, but he couldn’t, because, because what if Reki had been upset about Langa finding a boyfriend because *he* wanted to be Langa’s boyfriend? No. No, Langa shouldn’t misunderstand, he shouldn’t feed the tiny flame of hope, but it was too late, the flame was already flaring up, hot in his throat, because the way Reki snuggled into his lap, their legs pressed so sweetly together — the way he had *looked* at Langa in the hotel, the way he had swallowed with his eyes glued to Langa’s mouth, and, and, and —

And he had sounded so *sad,* his voice so low and upset, when he said, *I know you’re going to like him better than me.*

Desperately Langa tried to shove the thoughts away. He tried to think of that note on Reki's phone, *things to do when I get a girlfriend,* but then the feelings were swelling up again, in his chest and in his throat, because god, Reki had made a *list* of all the guys in their class who were Langa's type. What if he — what if he was *jealous?* Langa's mouth was so dry, his head spinning, and he was terrified, he was terrified of putting together the last pieces of the puzzle, he was terrified of being *wrong.*

What if he was misunderstanding? What if he was wrong and he lost this, the swell of happiness of just being *around* Reki, the feeling of Reki's gentle hands cupping his fingers, the feeling of Reki's thighs squeezing him on either side?

But what if he could have *more* ?

Reki blew on his fingers, nudging him with his free hand. "What d'you think?" he asked, showing Langa the nail polish, and Langa just stared at his fingers, his throat tight and full and god, god, god it was all too much, too much to hope for, it felt impossible. But Reki shifted against him, and Langa felt the warm scrape of his shorts against his thighs and his whole face went warm.

Reki was sitting in his *lap.* Reki was warm and solid and real, and what if it *was* possible?

"You don't like them?" said Reki, and quickly Langa tried to shake himself, he tried to shake his head.

"I do," he said, and he did, they were pretty, but really he wanted to blurt out *I like you,* because god, god, what if Reki flushed warm and mumbled it back? Langa could barely breathe with the thought of it. Something was expanding inside him, something fragile and hopeful with the bright, burning flame at the center, right in the core of his heart.

"Okay," said Reki, grinning so Langa could see his tooth gap, shaking his head a little as he capped the nail polish. He sounded so affectionate, and Langa's heart thumped, with hope, because god Reki liked him even when he was clumsy with his words, even when he forgot to make the right expressions with his face. Maybe, maybe Reki could still like him even if

Langa confessed how much of a sweaty mess he was, all the feelings tangled up in his heart, so many feelings for Reki, god, so much he didn't know how to say.

"Can I," Langa said, his mouth working without connecting to his brain, because god he wanted so many things, to hug and kiss and touch, but only if Reki wanted them, too, and god he could barely speak. Reki grinned, rubbing at his neck, and said,

"What?"

Langa's brain was stuck. He shook his head, a little, but Reki nudged him with his knee.

"No, go ahead," he said. "What d'you want? You can have it, whatever it is."

And, oh, Langa's chest burned. His whole body burned. How could Reki sit pillowed in his lap like this, the hem of his shirt riding up over his beautiful stomach, and just *offer* himself to Langa? Langa could barely breathe. He could barely speak, and his stomach was squirming, so hot, and *god* his hands were itching desperately. "I want a hug," Langa managed to say, because it felt overwhelming to ask for more, and Reki laughed a little, putting his hands on Langa's arms.

"Okay," Reki said, and god, he sounded so warm and happy and Langa's heart was going to burn right out of his chest. Reki's hair tickled his sunburnt cheeks, falling into his face as he leaned closer, and Langa's heart pounded more rapidly because oh, oh oh Reki was so close, Langa could feel his chest just inches away, and he couldn't breathe, and then Reki grabbed his shoulders. He squeezed, smiling, god his smile was so pretty, his lips so chapped, his teeth uneven, and he said, "Be careful about your nails, okay?"

And then Reki slid his arms around Langa's body, pressing their chests together, and Langa's heart staggered against his ribs. Reki squeezed him, and god, god he was so close, his hair tickling Langa's neck, his body shifting on top of him until Langa was burning up everywhere with how warm he was, god, god he was so warm and perfect and for a moment Langa couldn't remember what to do with his hands. But then, oh, Reki's warm skin, Langa would finally be allowed to touch Reki's warm skin, and without thinking he settled his hands on Reki's soft sides and all his breath left him in a *whoosh.*

Reki laughed a little, against him, and Langa gripped his waist, because oh oh oh, he could *feel* the way Reki laughed, and then Reki said, almost in his ear, “That’s not really a hug, y’know.”

“Ah,” Langa choked out, and oh, oh Reki was right, and he took his hands away, his face burning, but Reki settled back against his thighs, a small smile on his face. Gently he took Langa's wrists and put them on his waist again, and Langa tried to swallow, but he couldn't because Reki's skin was *so soft,* and Reki said,

“S’okay, Langa,”

and Langa’s heart stuttered again at the way Reki said his name, soft and low and affectionate, like a pet name all its own, and god Langa was going to lose his mind, he was going to lose his mind because of the way Reki was looking at him, one hand going up to tangle in Langa’s hair, Reki was looking at him like Langa made him happy, like he could sit here forever, lost in his eyes, and Langa couldn’t breathe, because what if Reki *loved* him —

“Can I kiss you?” Langa was asking, before he could think anything else, because he didn’t *want* to think anything else, he only wanted to think about Reki loving him, god, god that was all he wanted to think about for the rest of his life. Reki cleared his throat, shifting against his thighs again, his face red, and then he said,

“Yeah, of course,”

and he leaned in, and Langa surged up and they met each other halfway, their teeth clacking together, and Langa made a sound of pain, and Reki laughed against his mouth, his hands coming up to cup at Langa’s face, soothing his thumbs over Langa’s cheeks, murmuring, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” each word breathless with laughter. And then he kissed him again, sweetly, no teeth this time, and Langa whimpered against him, squeezing his sides, a little desperate, a little desperate because *god* Reki’s mouth was so warm, so perfect, and he kept laughing every time Langa squeezed him, squirming around in his lap, and finally it registered in Langa’s brain and he gasped out, “You — are you ticklish?”

“No,” said Reki, breathless with laughter, and he kissed Langa again, a shut-up kiss, and Langa’s heart swelled against his chest, because oh god oh god. He was so cute. Reki was so cute, laughing against Langa, and Langa pressed his fingers into Reki’s sides a little, just to

see, and Reki laughed harder, his forehead bumping against Langa's, their mouths falling inches apart, and then Langa felt the laughter bubbling up in his own chest, too, because Reki was so wonderful, so incredible, so perfect and Langa hadn't laughed in so long but he was laughing, now.

He dug his fingers into Reki's sides and Reki yelped, squirming, laughing and tugging on Langa's hair in revenge until Langa tilted his head up and then Reki kissed him again, full on the mouth, and Langa choked on his own laughter, because god Reki kissed so well, with so much energy, so much enthusiasm and Langa could only grip his waist and kiss back as best as he could. His heart was swelling against his ribs, so full, so happy, because maybe, maybe, maybe it could be real, maybe Reki could want to do this again, and again and again and again every day, whenever they wanted, maybe he would let Langa have all of him, his ticklish sides and his raspy singing voice and his self-esteem issues and maybe he would let Langa love him.

Langa was so lost in him, in all the kissing and the laughter and Reki's hands in his hair, that he didn't hear the door opening, he didn't hear anything at all. Reki pulled away from his mouth and Langa chased him, Langa surged up and tried to kiss him again, and then Reki gasped out a breath and tightened his hands in Langa's hair and only then, only then did Langa open his eyes, confused and startled, glancing at the door and oh, oh, oh.

Reki's mother was standing in the open doorway, arms full of groceries, eyes wide.

Chapter End Notes

hello hello hello!!!I don't have the time this week to link to everything I've been tagged in, but please please see crying renga by the lovely bubun.ji !!! it made me cry. you all must suffer, too.

as always, please be considerate and kind when you are leaving comments here and everywhere else. I am very sensitive haha and I need to take all necessary precautions for my mental health in these trying times <3 stay safe lovelies! until next time~

edited to add: please limit your discussion of homophobia/hate crimes in the comment section, since it is very difficult for me to read about. as I respect your triggers, please respect mine!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> trigger warnings for this chapter contain spoilers. if you don't want to be spoiled, please scroll to the beginning of the chapter now!
>
> tw: Reki panics because he is afraid his mother will be angry with him/stop loving him; it is implied once again that his dad was homophobic, and he's afraid she will be, too. if you are sensitive to these topics, I highly recommend pausing at "Reki buried his face in his hands" and hitting ctrl+f down to “The nail polish, it — crap.” please please stay safe!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reki’s mom’s face was very red.

Langa’s face was red, too, and his chest was heaving, his hands still tight on Reki’s sides as they stared at each other across the room. *Fuck,* Langa thought, *fuck fuck fuck, oh god, oh fuck,* and then Reki’s mom exclaimed,

“Oh my — boys! Oh my goodness, I — I’m so sorry! I was just putting these down, oh my goodness, I’ll just—” and then she was a flurry of motion, dropping the bags of groceries on the countertop, hands fluttering frantically, and then she was hurrying outside, leaving the front door wide, wide open.

“Fuck,” Langa whispered, desperately.

Reki buried his face in his hands. He was shaking, and Langa tried to grab his wrists, but Reki shook him off violently. Langa swallowed, pressing his hands into his lap, his face and neck flushing hot because *god* Reki’s mom had seen them, and Reki would be so mortified, Reki would be…

“It’s okay,” Langa tried, but Reki let out an awful sort of sound, a broken sound, rocking back and forth on Langa’s lap sucking in air. His chest was heaving, and Langa’s heartrate picked

up, pounding against his ribs, because was Reki — was Reki *crying?* "Hey," Langa tried, softer this time, "hey, Reki, it's—"

"It's not okay!"

Langa bit his tongue, hard. The hot summer air was seeping in through the open door, stifling around them, and Reki was still wedged into his lap, his voice cracked and raw and terrible. If his mom came back inside, she would see them pressed together again, so Langa tried to tug at Reki's sleeve. "Reki, hey," he said, even though his throat was tight, fuck, his throat was so tight and why was he so terrible at comforting? "Reki, Reki, it's okay, do you — do you wanna get up?"

Reki lifted his head again, and god, Langa's heart clenched. Reki's eyes were red and wet and his mouth, his mouth was sucking in air like he couldn't get enough, and Langa's hands twitched, because what was he supposed to do? He wanted to help. He wanted to help, but he didn't know *how,* Reki didn't want him to touch him, and Langa didn't know what he needed, why why had he never asked Reki what he needed?

"It's too late," Reki said, and his voice shook, and god, god Langa's chest hurt so badly he could barely breathe. "It's too late! She saw. She saw, oh my god, oh my god—"

He was shaking. He was shaking and sucking in air and Langa balled up his hands in his lap, trying to swallow, trying to swallow because how was Reki going to explain this? He couldn't say, he couldn't say that he and Langa were dating because they *weren't,* Reki wasn't even gay, but how would his mother ever believe that? Langa's stomach clenched. Maybe Reki would say that Langa had come onto him, and maybe that was true, maybe Langa had manipulated Reki the same way that he had manipulated Miguel, and he tried to swallow and swallow and swallow because Reki was beginning to shake harder, hunching over, pulling and pulling at the hem of his t-shirt, swearing under his breath in this wet broken voice and Langa's heart clenched tight.

"Fuck," Reki was muttering, his voice shaking, "fuck, she's gonna see that I took her shirt and she's gonna be so mad, she's gonna see, fuck, fuck, fuck —"

"She's not mad," Langa managed, but Reki just whimpered and covered his face again, and Langa swallowed hard. "Reki, I don't think she's mad. She's just — she's just surprised. She

didn’t yell.”

Reki was crying. Langa’s stomach sank, cold and sick, when he realized — Reki was sobbing into his hands, his shoulders hunched in, and Langa was lying back against the couch cushions, useless. “Reki,” he tried to whisper, “Reki, Reki, Reki, it’s okay, it’s okay,” but Reki only pressed his hands to his mouth, trying to stifle the sounds, and Langa’s heart hurt. His whole body hurt. The house was so hot, and he could hear the sounds of the neighborhood outside, and god where had his mom gone? Why had she run out of the house and left Reki inside sobbing on Langa’s lap, what if, what if she really was angry?

Langa tried to swallow. Carefully he touched Reki’s wrists, as carefully as he could, and whispered, “You’re going to suffocate yourself,” and then, when Reki’s body just heaved on a smothered sob, he added, softly, desperately, “Please, Reki?” and with a gasp Reki pulled his face out of his hands, his eyes soaked with tears, his mouth open, gasping.

“Reki,” Langa managed, and Reki gasped,

“Fuck,”

and hunched over himself again, pulling up his knees, pressing his hands to his eyes. Langa moved his hands to Reki’s shoulders, bracing him gently, trying not to touch too much because he remembered, he remembered now, he remembered the way that sometimes Reki’s bulky sweatshirts made his brain feel funny, the way Reki was always moving, switching cuddling positions, and maybe he couldn’t be touched too much right now, maybe he needed something else.

“What do you need?” Langa whispered, tugging lightly on his sleeves again, “what do you need, Reki, can I help?”

Reki sobbed, his shoulders drawing up tight, trying to curl himself into a ball on Langa’s lap and Langa had to steady him, his own hands shaking, so that Reki wouldn’t fall over. “It’s okay,” Langa tried whispering, because what else could he do, “it’s okay, it’s okay, Reki, it’s okay,” and then Reki lifted his face again and sobbed out,

“She’s gonna h- *hate* me,”

and Langa’s heart clenched so hard, so hard it hurt, like his chest was cracking open, and he whispered, “No, no, nonono Reki no, no, nobody hates you, nobody’s gonna hate you,” and Reki’s chest heaved with another broken sob.

“She’s gonna, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t,”

“Reki,”

“I *can’t,* I can’t, I can’t lose her too,” and Reki was rocking back and forth, pressing his hands to his face, trying to suck in air and Langa’s heart broke again, on that word *too.* “I can’t, Langa, I, I, I, I can’t, she’s gonna hate me, she’s gonna, she’s gonna, she’s gonna,”

“Breathe,” Langa whispered, desperate, his chest aching, his chest aching because what could he do? Reki’s sobs were ragged and breathless and he needed *air,* he needed to *breathe,* “Please, Reki, please, breathe for me?”

And Reki heaved in a breath, choking on it, and Langa’s heart stuttered, because maybe, maybe that had worked, a little, so he whispered,

“Breathe again, please, please,” and Reki did, he did, it was shaky and ragged but he breathed, and his shoulders slumped, and he sobbed on the exhale and Langa swallowed hard. “Reki, it’s okay, it’s okay, okay? You’re okay. You’re okay.”

Reki pressed his hands to his mouth. Langa couldn’t see his face, his hair was everywhere, and he wanted to stroke it the way Reki had stroked his own hair in the hotel, but he held himself back because Reki’s breathing was still ragged and broken and rough and Langa needed, Langa needed, Langa needed to help him.

“Reki, you’re okay,” he whispered again, and Reki made this sort of broken sound into his hands, so Langa said it again, and again, and then “good,” and “you’re good,” when Reki

sucked in more air, and then, and then, “she’s still gone, no one’s here, you’re safe,” and Reki’s exhale was long and shaky and his eyes were so red, so red when he lifted his head again, tears sliding down his face.

“Sorry,” he said, his voice cracking, and before Langa could respond he burst out, “I fucked up! Everything — everything — and I fucked up, oh my god, I fucked it up, how, how am I ever gonna — “

“Hey,” Langa whispered, catching his hands again before Reki could bite at his knuckles, the way he sometimes did until they bled, and Reki’s chest heaved, and for a moment he just stared at Langa, into Langa’s face, his mouth pressed closed, wobbling. “Hey,” Langa whispered again, something desperate thudding in his chest, and he didn’t want to say it, he didn’t, he didn’t he didn’t he didn’t but he made himself say it anyway. “You can — you can blame it on me, if you want, if you need, you can say, you can say it was my idea, you can say —”

“No,” said Reki, and then pressed his mouth shut again, his chest rising and falling heavily as he rubbed at his face with both hands. “No, Langa, stop, I’m not gonna — I’m not gonna — I’m just gonna — I’m just gonna have to, fuck.”

He slumped forward again, breathing hard, and Langa’s throat tightened, it hurt, everything hurt, and the stupid curtains fluttered in the hot hot hot summer air, mocking, as if they didn’t understand, they didn’t understand the way the world was crumbling down. “Nobody hates you,” Langa whispered, his heart breaking, because god, had anything ever been so painful as watching Reki’s life shatter in front of his eyes? “Nobody hates you, Reki, we all — we all love you, we love you, I love you, okay, nobody hates you,” and Reki’s broken voice got out,

“But,”

and Langa’s chest squeezed so tight, thinking of Reki’s father, Reki’s terrible father, god, god, god, and he said, “Nobody who matters,” and Reki’s shoulders heaved, once, and then slumped again.

His head knocked against Langa’s shoulder. Langa stiffened, and then Reki’s hands fisted in Langa t-shirt and Langa dared to rub his back, a little, smoothing his hands over the damp fabric between Reki’s shoulder blades, and Reki slumped more heavily against him, burying

his mouth in Langa's shoulder. Langa's heart thumped, because god, god if his mother came in again, they were going to have even more explaining to do but that didn't matter, nothing mattered, nothing except for Reki, and making sure Reki was okay, making sure he was breathing.

"Hey," Langa whispered, because maybe this was what Reki needed, maybe, the words, and Langa had to dig frantically in his chest for words. He had never been able to find the words for Reki before, to comfort him, but now there was no other choice and so Langa forced the words through his raw throat. "You're good, you're good, okay? You're good. You're brave. You're, you're so brave, you're so awesome, you're so cool Reki, you're my favorite person, and I'm here, I'm always going to be here, with you, okay? So, so you're safe. You're safe. It's just us. And, and no matter what I'm always going to, to love you."

His throat was so tight on those words, *I love you,* because they were true, oh god they were so much truer than Reki would ever know, and even though Langa had said those words before, he had never been able to show Reki how much he meant them. He squeezed Reki's shoulders in a hug, and Reki breathed out harshly against him, rubbing his mouth.

"Ah," he said, and then he lifted his face out of Langa's shoulder, rubbing his eyes, scrubbing away the tears. "Dude, I — fuck. I'm so sorry. Fuck. I should have, I should have been more careful."

"Don't be sorry," Langa said, and Reki huffed out another breath, almost a laugh, the same laughing thing he always did when he was trying not to cry, and he scrubbed at his eyes again.

"Crap," he said, rocking a little on Langa's thighs, glancing down at his lap. "Do you really — do you really think she wasn't mad? I mean, we...we were…and she saw…"

"She didn't sound — mad," Langa managed, because she hadn't, not really, just flustered, just surprised. "She said she was sorry."

Reki sucked in a breath and heaved a shaky exhale. He made fists on top of his thighs, and then he glanced up quickly at Langa's face and then down at his hands, tugging one of Langa's wrists up off the couch. "Did you — oh," he said, and then he breathed another shaky laugh, rubbing at his eyes again. "The nail polish, it — crap."

Langa looked down at his hands, startled, and oh, oh Jesus, the nail polish had smeared all over his fingers, all over the top of his shorts where he had balled up his hands. “Fuck,” he whispered, glancing hastily at the couch and wincing, because Jesus, he had stained that too, but Reki just gave another watery, shaky laugh and caught Langa’s wrists in his hands.

“It’s okay,” Reki said. God, his voice was so raw. He hadn’t cried enough; he deserved a long, long crying session, bundled up in Langa’s arms, and Langa swallowed. Reki climbed to his feet and Langa wobbled after him, feet unsteady. His legs had fallen asleep from the weight of Reki on top of them, and Reki caught his arm and squeezed so hard it hurt, for a long moment. His face was screwed up, and Langa tried to breathe, with him, tried to brace himself for the worst.

“Whatever happens,” Langa began, and Reki said,

“I know, I know,” and then squeezed again, not so painfully this time, and released Langa’s arm. He took a deep, shaky breath, and Langa’s heart thumped, and he wanted to blurt out how brave Reki was, how strong, how powerful to still be standing even after everything his father had done to try to break him down. But then Reki rubbed at his face with the heel of his hand and muttered, “Thanks, Langa.”

Langa’s heart thumped again, painful. “Of course,” he said, because what else could he say? He couldn’t promise that other people would continue to love Reki, he could only promise that he would, forever and ever, and carefully he slid his hand into Reki’s. He meant to only squeeze once, but Reki clutched his palm, his fingers rough and desperate against Langa’s knuckles, and Langa said quietly, “Do you want me to come find her with you?”

Reki nodded and nodded and nodded and rubbed his mouth, he rubbed his eyes, he forced out a breath and bounced a little on the balls of his feet. “It’s okay,” he said, to himself, “it’s okay it’s okay it’s okay.”

“It’s okay,” Langa repeated.

Reki bobbed his head, hard. Then he squeezed Langa’s hand again, and together they moved slowly around the couch, across the kitchen, over the threshold of the house. Langa had the

thumping feeling in his chest that things might never be the same again, but he squeezed Reki's hand hard and tried to breathe, he tried to be brave, for him, for Reki.

Outside was so hot. So very hot. The asphalt burned under Langa's bare feet, and his eyes burned in the sun, and in the driveway Reki's mom's car glistened, bright-hot, and then Langa saw her, hovering by the open trunk, her face creased up with worry, more groceries abandoned on the ground around her.

For a moment the world seemed to tilt, hazy and hot with the overpowering sun, the panic numbing up Langa's whole chest, his whole throat, and then Reki's mom made a noise, and Reki sucked in a sob, his shoulders shaking once, and then

and then

and then everything blurred for a moment as Reki's mom lifted her arms, holding them open, a bright hot spot of color against the swimming world, and Reki's hand tore out of Langa's as he flung himself toward her.

Langa stumbled back a bit, his heel catching on the stones at the edge of the garden, scraping hot and painful but it didn't matter, it didn't matter, it didn't matter because Langa blinked hard, rubbing his eyes, and then Reki was hugging his mom, he was hugging her and she was hugging him, their heads buried in each other's shoulders, and Langa *breathed.* He breathed in and heaved an exhale, oh god oh god thank god, and Reki's mom was rubbing his back and his hair as Reki clutched her, sobbing.

Oh, oh, oh.

Langa's heart was slowly breaking in relief.

He rubbed the sweat out of his burning eyes, and maybe he was crying, too, a little, because the fear was washing over him now, the fear that he and Reki might have had to face something too big and terrible for the both of them, and his whole body was trembling with the relief and the panic of it all. Langa opened his eyes, and the world swam, but then he

blinked and it became clearer, the sky and the sun and the street settling back into place, the neighbor across the street watering his plants in the sweltering heat.

Reki was caged in his mom's arms, bobbing up and down a little on the balls of his feet, and she was saying something, her eyes wet, and Langa breathed out and he breathed in. The tight thing in his chest was easing up, the thing that had stuck there because for a moment he had thought the world was ending.

Langa sank down on top of the stone edge of the planters, watching Reki and his mother in the bright sunshine, watching them hold onto each other. His heart was still thudding against his chest, but it eased with every breath, it eased because she wasn't angry, her face was soft, and she was rubbing the tears away from Reki's sunburnt cheek with her sleeve. And then Reki laughed, his face red and raw with the crying, he laughed into the sounds of the bright, sunny day and Langa's heart squeezed, once, before relaxing again, his cheeks still damp with his own tears.

Reki's laugh was the only sound he needed to hear.

Reki's mom asked Langa if she could talk to Reki alone, for a minute. "It's nothing bad, honey," she said, settling her warm hand on Langa's shoulder, her face still pink, the groceries spilling onto the kitchen floor around them. Langa glanced nervously at Reki, who was still tugging at the hem of his cut-off shirt, but Reki gave him a clumsy smile, so Langa took a deep breath and nodded.

It was quiet when he shut the door of Reki's bedroom behind himself. The sunlight was pouring onto his bed through the open window, and Langa let himself flop backwards into the middle of it, staring up at the ceiling. Reki's mattress sank comfortably underneath him, and he shut his eyes tightly, because it smelled so much like Reki, everything in this house smelled like Reki, and Langa breathed him in and *ached.*

God. He just wanted...he just wanted everything to be okay, for Reki's mom to support them, except there was no *them* , not really. What was Reki telling her right now? That he and Langa were just practicing? Or maybe he was confessing that he was gay, or bi, or something

else, and that he secretly liked Langa, and Langa's heart ached even more, with how badly he wanted that to be true. But maybe Reki was explaining that he was confused, that he was still figuring things out, that probably he would still end up marrying a girl anyway and Langa swallowed, rolling over, hugging one of Reki's pillows to his chest.

He didn't want to be something to figure out. He just wanted to be loved.

Langa buried his face in the pillow. It smelled like Reki, and Langa sort of wanted to cry, with how shaken up he felt, still trembling from the leftover fear. Everything had finally felt right, with Reki's mouth sealed against his on that couch, his hands on Reki's waist, and now he had no idea where Reki's head was at, again.

He lay there for a long time, hugging the pillow, his legs sprawled over the bed. Finally the door opened, and Langa pulled his head out of the pillow, gazing blearily at the door. Reki's face was rosy, his eyes still red and puffy, and he was holding two popsicles, a blue one and a red one.

"Are you—are you okay?" Langa asked, his voice scratchy, and Reki made a face, rubbing at his nose with his wrist.

"Yeah," he said, and then he huffed out a breath, letting the door fall shut behind him, leaning against it. "Sorry. Sorry, that was just, it was a lot, I shouldn't have freaked out, I just, crap, sorry, I—"

"No," said Langa hastily, sitting up, and his shirt stuck to his sweaty stomach, and he watched Reki's eyes dart briefly to the skin before Langa tugged the shirt down. Reki swallowed, and Langa swallowed, his face going warm, and he said, "What happened? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," said Reki, but he averted his eyes, his face red. One of his legs was bouncing, and Langa fisted the comforter in his hands, because Reki still looked flushed and agitated and maybe, maybe he was still feeling shaky the same way Langa was.

“Is there anything I can do?” Langa asked, and Reki turned redder, rubbing at his face again. The popsicle dripped onto his hand, and Langa swallowed again, and then Reki said, sounding embarrassed,

“Can you—can you cuddle me? Sorry, I just need...I just need…”

Langa’s heart thumped quickly. “I—of course,” he said, and he scrambled to the head of the bed, his legs stretched out, bathed in the sunlight, and shuffled the pillows around to make a space for Reki. “Come here,” he said, his neck flushing warm at how forward he sounded, because god, god, god they had been making out barely half an hour ago, and Reki shuffled across the room.

The mattress sank under Reki’s knees when he climbed onto the bed, and then he was toppling into the space next to Langa, curling up into his side. Langa swallowed again, untangling his arm from between them so he could settle it carefully over Reki’s shoulders, and Reki made a noise in the back of his throat, snuggling his head into Langa’s shoulder. Langa’s heart squirmed, because god, his body was so warm, so sweaty and heavy with his damp hair pressing against Langa’s arm. Langa just wanted to close his eyes and sleep here, with him, but they needed to talk, so he cleared his throat.

“She’s not mad?” Langa managed, and Reki breathed out, hot against Langa’s shoulder, and shook his head.

“Nah,” he said. “I should’ve known she wouldn’t be. Hah. I guess—” He huffed a laugh— “I guess I was just scared ‘cause of, you know.”

Because of his dad. Langa nodded, afraid to say anything in case his wobbling voice gave anything away, in case he blurted out *so are you gay?* because, because, because that wouldn’t be fair, asking Reki to come out to him before he was ready. Reki squirmed on the bed, draping one of his legs over Langa’s thigh and tucking his foot into the space between Langa’s legs, and Langa tried to swallow again, but he couldn’t, because his throat was suddenly so, so dry.

Reki’s legs were fuzzy and soft and so warm. And Langa’s body was so, so sweaty.

“Just wanna lay here all day,” Reki mumbled into his shoulder, and then he lifted his head a little, as if remembering something, and said, “Oh — here.” He pressed the blue popsicle into Langa’s hand, biting off the top of the red one, and Langa tried not to watch the way Reki licked at the corner of his mouth afterward, he tried, he tried so hard but his stomach was already squirming again.

God. They needed to *talk,* not...not this.

“What,” Langa managed, and then he had to clear his throat, because the fear was beginning to creep down his legs again. “What did you...tell her?”

Reki glanced up at him, and Langa swallowed again, his throat dry. Reki’s eyes were golden in the light and it felt like the whole world was weighted in his gaze, in the way Reki scrunched up his face, just a little. Then he glanced away again, his cheeks reddening, rubbing at his knee with the hand holding the popsicle. “I just, uh. I told her the truth.”

Langa’s throat was so dry, so dry. What did that mean? What was the truth? That they were only friends who kissed sometimes? Who kissed often? Or did Reki mean something else entirely? Langa opened his mouth to ask, because he *needed* to know, he *needed* to, but then Reki said quickly,

“Oops,”

and Langa glanced down in time to see Reki drop a piece of popsicle on his arm, cold and wet against the sweaty skin there.

“Sorry,” said Reki, but he didn’t sound sorry, and Langa swallowed, opening his mouth again because he *knew* that Reki had done that on purpose, to escape the conversation, but then Reki grabbed his arm and lifted it up and he—Langa choked—he bent his head and *sucked* the popsicle off Langa’s skin.

Langa jerked away, his body burning, his face burning, and Reki laughed quickly, and then said, “Sorry, sorry sorry man, okay, I’m really sorry.” He petted Langa’s arm, and Langa stared at him, his face flushed, so hot, god, he was going to die, and Reki’s face sobered up.

“Sorry,” Reki said again, more apologetically this time, and rubbed his thumb over the sticky spot. Langa’s body *burned.* How could Reki just...and he could still *feel* it, Reki’s lips against his skin, the brief wet touch of his tongue, and, and, and…

Reki snuggled up to his side again, dropping his head back onto Langa’s shoulder, and Langa breathed out shakily, clutching the stick of his own popsicle. God. God, he needed to get a handle on himself.

“Sorry,” said Reki, more quietly. He shifted, clearing his throat. “I just told her…y’know. I told her that I’ve been doing some thinking lately, you know, about liking guys, y’know, like just as much as I like girls. And she said, she said she would love me no matter what, so that’s—that’s cool, that’s really cool.”

Langa felt like the world was slowing down around him. “Wait, you...you like guys?”

Reki huffed out a breath, almost a laugh. “Yeah? Dude, I thought you knew.”

Langa shook his head, his tongue all tied up. How was he supposed to know? He had hoped, of course, he had laid awake so many nights hoping and hoping, but he had never dared to ask, and Reki had never said anything.

Reki liked boys. The world seemed to expand, bigger than before, more real, like Langa was holding his breath.

“Sorry,” said Reki, still quietly. “Sorry, it’s just, it just feels new to say, still.” He shifted. “I mean I’m just, I’m still, I, I just feel all — gah. Shaky. From earlier.”

Langa released the breath, and then nodded, squeezing Reki’s shoulder a little, the skin there warm and textured, coarse from the sunburn. “Okay,” Langa said, his heart beating slowly in his chest. “Me...me too, sort of.”

Reki picked at the popsicle, breaking a piece off the stick and putting it in his mouth. “Sorry for freaking out,” he said, and he sounded embarrassed again, snuggling his warm cheek against Langa’s arm, Langa’s sleeve rucking up so that Reki’s face pressed against the bare skin there. “I just...wasn’t expecting my mom to just...y’know.”

Langa breathed out again, nodding, squeezing him again. Reki cuddled closer, and god, Langa wanted to hold him forever, tangled up on the bed, the setting sun streaming in through the window onto their legs. “It’s okay,” he said, quietly, and Reki sighed a little, not a happy sigh but not an unhappy one, either, and Langa leaned his head carefully onto the top of Reki’s hair. He smelled like sweat, and nail polish, and a little bit like baking soda. Maybe they could be okay, as long as they could continue to hold each other like this, with the soft sounds of Reki’s mother moving around in the kitchen through the walls. Somewhere a bird called to its friend, and Langa had something he needed to say, something he hadn’t realized he could say aloud, until just now. But the thought came to him, and it seemed right, because the heat was fading into something soft and manageable and Reki had sucked the last of his popsicle off the stick, his sweaty arms lying heavily against Langa’s body.

“I’m sorry I’m not very good at comforting you,” Langa said, softly, and he felt a bit warm from the shame, his mind full of the times at the mixer and the mall when his tongue had been all tied up, unable to say the words Reki needed to hear. Reki lifted his head, scrambling up the headboard a bit, putting his warm hand on Langa’s arm.

For a moment Langa just looked up at him, a bit helplessly, because god he was so beautiful in the sun, so beautiful and imperfect and broken in all these tiny places that Langa wanted so badly to be able to fill. Reki touched the side of his face, gently.

“Langa, man,” he said. “Dude, you’re the best at comforting me.”

Langa swallowed. “But I...I never know what to say.”

Reki considered that, rolling his head to the side, poking his tongue into his cheek. His eyes caught and lingered on something outside the window, and then he traced his thumb over Langa’s cheek, and Langa tried not to shudder. “Well,” said Reki, and then he cleared his throat. “Maybe I could...I could tell you? What to say, I mean.”

The breath stuck in Langa’s throat. “Really?”

Reki nodded a little, looking down at their laps, his leg shifting on top of Langa's. He looked a bit embarrassed, his cheeks red. "I mean, I mean the things you already say are good. I guess I just. When I get upset I just need to blow off steam sometimes, like, at first I can't really talk to anybody. That's why, that's why I guess I push you away, sometimes, it's not 'cause, it's not 'cause I'm mad."

Langa felt a breath leave him, something loosening in his chest. "Really?"

He had never known. He had always thought...he had always thought he was doing something wrong.

Reki nodded, pulling at a thread of his t-shirt. "I'm working on it," he said, and then sighed again, leaning against Langa's side again, his chest so warm through the faded fabric. "And sometimes I don't wanna be touched, right away, 'cause it just, it feels like a lot. But then once I calm down it's okay. So I just. I just need to be better about telling you what's okay, I guess."

Langa nodded, again. He felt something fragile swelling up in his chest again, like hope, because, because maybe that was possible, for Reki to tell him what he needed and for Langa to give it to him. Maybe Langa could be that person for him. He swallowed and squeezed Reki's arm, and Reki cuddled closer, tucking his foot between Langa's legs again and the thing in Langa's chest expanded, warm and hopeful.

"And the things I can say?" Langa dared to ask.

Reki rubbed at his face. God, his cheeks were so red. "I guess," he said, and then he cleared his throat. "I guess it helps to hear that...that I'm good enough? Gah, it sounds so stupid." He rubbed hard at the bandaid on his nose, and Langa pulled his hand out of the jumble of pillows to catch Reki's wrist, tugging it away from the damaged skin.

"No," Langa said, quietly. "No, I…I wanna know."

Reki made a face, and god, Langa's heart throbbed, because he was so pretty, and so deserving, so deserving of all the good things in the world, and Langa ached to be able to give him only a tiny fraction of those things. The sun glowed orange on Reki's face when he said, "I like when you tell me I'm doing a good job. And, uh. Sometimes you say this thing, like...that I'm perfect." He screwed up his face again. "I know that's not true, but I guess, I guess it feels good to hear it anyway."

Langa's heart squeezed, and oh, oh, if Reki only knew how badly Langa longed to tell him he was perfect. He swallowed. Between their bodies he found Reki's hand, and clumsily he tangled their fingers together, and he saw Reki swallow, his throat bobbing. "You *are* perfect," Langa said, and his voice sounded raw, and he knew it was too honest, but oh, the way Reki ducked his head, rubbing at his cheek, oh, oh.

"M'not," Reki mumbled, but then he mumbled, "Thanks," and the fragile hope in Langa's heart swelled bigger. He wanted to touch Reki's face. He wanted to, so he did, with his free hand, lifting the sunlit edges of Reki's hair off his cheek and brushing his fingers gently over the skin there. Reki's eyes sank closed, and Langa dared to touch the delicate skin just underneath his eyelashes, and Reki breathed in and out slowly.

For a moment Langa was just allowed to touch, to appreciate, hardly breathing because it felt like he might shatter the moment if he did. Maybe this could help, too, he thought, when he didn't have the words, maybe he could show Reki how beautiful he was by touching him this way.

"And," Reki said, his voice scratchy, finally opening his eyes again, and Langa's heart thumped. "I like when you...when you tell me the things you like about me." And, god, he sounded so embarrassed, and Langa felt his neck warming, because god, god, if Reki only knew how many things Langa liked about it, how many *lists* Langa had made, trying to get the thoughts out of his head. Reki swallowed, his tongue touching the chapped skin on his bottom lip, and Langa's heart throbbed again. "Like, like when you said you like the talking thing. Sorry. Sorry, I don't mean to…"

"No," whispered Langa, when Reki trailed off, looking too red to continue. "I like hearing you talk," and Reki made an aborted sound, burying his face in Langa's shoulder, and Langa squeezed his arm again, holding him close. God, he could *feel* how flushed Reki was, and it made his heart push against his ribs with how full it was, how hopeful. "It's my...it's my favorite thing in the world."

“God,” Reki said, muffled, into his shirt and Langa squeezed him, his cheeks going warm, too, because it was one of those things Reki had picked up from him, the soft muttered curses every so often, and Langa felt so flushed and fuzzy when he thought about himself picking up things from Reki, too. He buried his own mouth in the top of Reki’s hair, for a moment, just breathing him in, because *god* he smelled so good and his leg was such a warm weight on top of Langa’s thigh and then Reki mumbled something against him, too muffled to be heard, and Langa lifted his face again.

“What?”

Reki squirmed, and his free hand clutched at the front of Langa’s t-shirt, dragging the fabric away from Langa’s sweaty skin, and Langa felt himself flush, again, all the way down his chest. Reki mumbled the thing again, and Langa’s heart was pounding in his cheeks a bit, because he still couldn’t make out Reki’s words, and he needed to, so he shook Reki’s shoulder as gently as he could.

“What, Reki,” he said, and Reki unlatched his mouth from Langa’s sleeve enough to mutter,

“You could...gah,” and then he pressed his face to Langa’s arm again. Langa felt very hot, very very warm from the way Reki’s thigh shifted against him. Langa pressed his thumb carefully into Reki’s arm.

“What?” he asked, more quietly this time. “Reki, you can tell me. I’ll do...I’ll do whatever it is.”

Reki squirmed, tugging on Langa’s shirt. “Don’t say that,” he mumbled, and then he lifted his face a little more. “You know that...that thing I said in the hotel, the thing that my mom—ah! Nothing, never mind, never mind,” and he was pressing his face into Langa’s sleeve again, and Langa’s chest was filling with warmth, because he thought he understood what Reki meant, what Reki wanted, and oh, oh, oh.

He hadn’t fully imagined being allowed to do this, ever before. Langa pressed his mouth briefly to Reki’s hair to prepare himself, to quiet his swelling heart, trying to smother his smile.

“Baby,” he said, quietly, and Reki squirmed immediately, making a sound in his throat, and Langa curled his toes among the blankets, his body flushing warm, because oh, oh, oh. Reki *liked* it, so Langa whispered, “Reki, baby,” and Reki squirmed again and oh, god, oh god, it felt so good to say, like the words were meant for Langa’s mouth. He liked the way they were shaped.

“Okay,” Reki mumbled, sounding embarrassed, god, so embarrassed and Langa’s heart pushed against his ribs again, so happy, so impossibly happy because *god* Reki was so precious, so precious and lovely and Langa finally had the words to tell him, words he had never gotten his mouth around the shape of before.

“Baby,” he whispered again, because he liked it, he liked the way it sounded, he liked the way it filled out his throat, he liked the way it made Reki squirm, releasing Langa’s shirt to press his hand over his face, curling his body up like he was trying to hide from it. “Baby,” Langa said again, “Reki, baby, baby, you’re so good, baby, you’re so wonderful, you’re—”

“Okay,” rasped out Reki, pushing limply at his shoulder, no strength behind it at all, and god, his *voice,* his voice like he was totally wrecked, like Langa had ruined him with only those two syllables, and Langa’s toes curled again, happy. “Okay, that’s — that’s enough.”

“Okay,” Langa agreed, because his chest was so full and he was pretty sure, he was pretty sure that Reki would let him say it again, sometime, and god, he was so happy he could squirm. Reki buried his face in Langa’s sleeve again and mumbled something else, something Langa knew he wasn’t supposed to hear or understand, so he just carded his fingers through Reki’s hair and Reki snuggled against him again, huffing out a sigh when his head lolled back against the pillows, their bodies warm and content, tangled together in the dying light.

They sat there for a while, and Langa’s chest kept throbbing gently against his chest, every time that Reki shifted his leg, or cleared his throat, or rubbed his callused thumb over Langa’s knuckles. Their palms were sweaty from holding hands for so long, but Langa thought of that reminder in Reki’s phone, *hold hands a lot like a lot,* and instead of feeling sad, he felt all warm and giddy inside, like maybe, maybe, maybe Reki had found that he liked holding hands a lot with *Langa.* Like maybe Langa could be that person, for him. Reki liked boys, after all, he had said so himself, and maybe, maybe he could even like Langa.

The door cracked open softly a while later, and Reki didn’t scramble to get away, he just lifted his head and mumbled a hello as his mom stepped inside, holding two bowls of food.

She gave Langa the gentlest smile, and Langa felt warm from his face to his toes, a bit embarrassed to be seen cuddling Reki like this in such plain sight, but Reki didn't seem embarrassed anymore. He just said "thank you" when his mom handed them the food, and after she kissed Reki's forehead, she hesitated a moment before kissing Langa's, too.

Langa felt warm and full and so, so happy.

They ate and watched the birds flying home to their nests out the window, the sounds of summer filtering in, children's laughing voices fading in and then out again as they rode by on bikes, and Langa knew that tomorrow he and Reki could be like those children, coasting along on their boards, hearts full of love and hands clinging to each other, like a happy little family all their own.

"She liked my shirt," Reki mumbled, a long time later, when he had set up his phone in the crease of his knee, propped up so they could watch skating videos from the time they first met, when Langa had been so embarrassingly awful, his feet all taped up and his hands bloodied. Langa stirred, just a little, untangling his hand from Reki's frizzy hair.

"What?"

"My mom," said Reki, and he snuggled against Langa's side again, breathing out, contented. "She said she liked my shirt."

"Oh," said Langa, and the words sank into his skin, heavy and warm like the feeling of summer, because oh, he knew how much that meant to Reki, he understood. "I like it too," he said, softly, and then added, "Baby," and his skin glowed at the way Reki laughed into his shoulder.

Langa was going to confess.

He had made up his mind; he was going to confess to Reki. Reki, the most talented boy in the world, who could build anything with his two hands and a hammer, who could make ten-minute rice in five minutes, who kissed in the same way that he laughed, with his whole body. Reki, who was always a flurry of motion, his hands on Langa's face, on Langa's wrists, sweaty palms pressing to Langa's.

Langa was finally going to get to stand in front of him and clutch those hands in his own and stutter out, *I love you, Reki.*

He took a deep breath, glancing around his bedroom floor. It was Sunday night, and the evening air was rustling the curtains, and Langa's bedroom was full of things, even more things than usual. He rubbed the small Pokémon plushie he had bought between his fingers. Earlier today, when he was running errands, he had seen the plushie in a shop window, and he had remembered Reki winning him all those prizes at the carnival and he had remembered his online shopping cart full of presents for Reki and, and, and.

And, okay. Maybe he had bought a few too many things.

Langa screwed up his eyes, as if that would make the piles of gifts surrounding him seem any smaller. It was just that he had always *longed* to be able to buy Reki things. His hands always twitched when he saw Reki's favorite candy at the convenience store, or a hoodie that would look so soft on him, or a skateboarding tool that Reki would really love, because he *knew* the way Reki's face would break into a smile when he saw it. He knew the way Reki's cheeks would go pink as he took the gift, saying sheepishly, *"Aw, man, you didn't have to,* " and he knew how happy Reki would secretly be, the way he would keep touching the gift when he thought Langa wasn't looking. Langa would glow inside, so much, seeing Reki happy over something *he* had given him.

So maybe he had stuffed too many things into his shopping bags, maybe he had spent almost all of his last paycheck, maybe he had crept into his apartment with his arms full, afraid that his mom would catch him. But it wasn't his fault. He had just seen so many things he knew that Reki would like, so many different colored headbands and art supplies and stickers and little hair bands, so he could braid Reki's hair again, and, and, and. And sunscreen, and chapstick, because Reki needed it, and because Langa wanted to watch him rub it carefully over his pretty mouth, and eyeliner so he could see Reki try it on, and colorful band-aids, and new nail polish, all sorts of different kinds of nail polish.

Langa pressed the head of the plushie against his mouth, feeling his face warm as he gazed at the presents. Okay. Maybe there were too many.

He squeezed his eyes shut. It wasn't his fault! This was—this was his one and only chance to confess to Reki, and it had to be perfect, because Langa had to be as convincing as possible. Langa swallowed, the anxiety rising up in his throat all over again, the same anxiety he had been trying to push down all day. He knew that if he wasn't careful, the confession would quickly devolve into him begging, begging for Reki to please allow Langa to be with him, even if it was only for a little while, even if only for the summer.

Langa swallowed again. He knew there was a good chance that Reki would say no. There was still a chance he would laugh and pat Langa's arm awkwardly and say, *"Man, aw, man I'm sorry, crap, I never meant for the kissing thing to go this far,* " and Langa would have to bite the insides of his mouth and force himself to stop pleading.

It was going to hurt really, really badly if Reki said no. Langa buried his face deeper into the plushie, tucking his knees up into his chest, hugging his legs. If Reki said no, then the warm little glow of hope in Langa's chest would be snuffed out, and they would definitely not be able to kiss anymore. Langa tried not to imagine curling up in Reki's bed with him and staring at his pretty, pretty mouth and knowing he would never be allowed to kiss it again. He squirmed a little. He told himself he would be able to grit his teeth and bear it, he would be able to pretend to smile, he would be able to stand in the corner and watch Reki laugh as he kissed other people, he would be able to go on being Reki's friend and nothing more, he would he would he would.

God, he hoped Reki didn't say no.

His mom's keys jingled in the front door and Langa jolted upward, glancing around guiltily at all his gifts. Hopefully his mom wouldn't come into his bedroom, because Langa would never be able to explain—but then, god, she was knocking on his door, her voice loud above the air conditioning. "Langa, sweetie, are you cleaning your room?"

Langa swallowed. "Yes," he said, but fuck, it even *sounded* guilty. There was a beat of silence, and then the doorknob turned, and Langa tried to scramble to hide the tie-dye set and the glow-in-the-dark skateboard wheels and all the stuffed animals, god, all the stuffed animals he wanted Reki to sleep with when Langa wasn't there, but it was too late.

His mom stood in the doorway, gazing down at his floor.

“Oh my goodness,” she said. “Langa, did—did you buy all of this?”

Langa swallowed, dropping the plushies back onto the carpet. He could already feel his neck going warm as his mother stared at the big, soft blanket with sleeves he had bought, and the bundle of sunflowers, and the Hawaiian-print crop top. “Um,” Langa said, and she shook her head, her forehead creasing.

“Baby, what—why?”

“It’s for Reki,” said Langa, his face warming, too, because what else was he supposed to say? He felt all tongue-tied, and he hoped his mom couldn’t see the confession letter that he had handwritten, all seven pages of it, with several post-scripts scribbled onto the end because he kept remembering new things to add, things he loved about Reki. The letter would stay hidden until Reki had answered his confession, until Reki had flushed warm and red and said, *okay, we can try,* and then, and then, and then Langa could push all of the presents into his lap, all of them, with his own heavy blush and watch Reki splutter.

But right now he was stuck in his room with his mother, who was eyeing the matching temporary tattoos Langa had gotten in a random checkout line. “Why did you buy all this for Reki, baby?” she asked. “It’s not his birthday.”

Langa swallowed. “I, I just…”

She glanced up into his face. Langa could feel his cheeks heat up even more, and she must have noticed, because slowly she let the door fall closed behind her, and Langa tried to bite his tongue, but he couldn’t, he was so strung up and flustered that he blurted out,

“I just want him to like me,”

and his mom's face fell into something like understanding. "Oh, baby," she said, and she came over to him, sitting down gently on the bed so that her hand could rest on his head, and Langa looked at the floor, swallowing again. His head was full of the way Reki had cuddled into his arm last night, the way Langa had been so warm and content and certain that Reki loved him back. He had been certain then, but now, now the anxiety was creeping back up his throat.

"I just," he said, and god, god, how could he ever explain? "I just, I'm gonna tell him I like him, and I wanted to…"

"Sweetheart," his mom said, and Langa swallowed as she petted his hair, tucking it behind his ears. "You know that you don't have to buy him things to get him to like you, right?"

"I know," said Langa, and then he swallowed again, nudging his toe against the multi-colored sketchbook he had gotten. On the first page he had tried to draw a picture of Reki, which had turned out terribly. God. "It's not that, it's just...I just want it to be perfect, because, because Reki's never gotten a confession before and I…" Langa swallowed. He didn't mean to say it, but then the words were toppling out, "and, and I love him."

His mom was quiet for a moment, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, hugging his knees tightly to his chest. It was hard to breathe, because of how much he loved Reki, and how big everything felt, and real, how impossible that later this week he could finally *say* those words to Reki. It was overwhelming. And it was so much pressure, because Reki had given him the perfect date, so effortlessly, and Reki was so wonderful and smart and delightful and Langa was just, Langa was just *Langa.*

His mom ruffled his hair, standing up. "I have something for you, alright, love?" she said. "Don't go anywhere."

Langa managed to open his eyes as his mom hurried out of the room, and when she returned, she was holding a glossy printed photo. She handed it to him, and Langa blinked in surprise at his own face, his and Reki's laughing faces pressed together, their bodies balancing on the same skateboard. He remembered this day. It was from early February, around Valentine's, and Reki had been hurting because Langa had gotten dozens and dozens of chocolates on his desk and Reki had gotten nothing.

Langa swallowed, tracing the lines of Reki's body in the photo, the way he was laughing so hard he was almost falling off the board.

Langa had made him feel that way.

He swallowed again, his throat full. In the photo, with their bright, laughing faces, the warm colors...they looked happy together. The love in Langa's eyes was so obvious, the way his arm was wrapped around Reki's waist, holding him upright. Reki had been so happy that day, with Langa holding him, Langa loving him, even though nothing had been perfect. They had stumbled on that skateboard and scraped their knees and Langa had panicked so hard at the blood, but Reki had still laughed and helped him up, and maybe, maybe…

Maybe he could still love Langa, even if he stumbled through the confession, even if it wasn't perfect.

"I thought you could give this to him," said his mom, watching him, and Langa tried to clear his throat, but it was too full, and his chest was full now, too, the hope pressing against his ribcage.

"Can you…" Langa tried not to squeeze the photo, he tried not to wrinkle it, because god, god it should be perfect when he gave it to Reki. "Can you print out another one, for me? I want...I want us to be the same."

His mom stroked his hair off his forehead, and he could hear the smile in her voice when she said, "Of course, baby."

The next day was cloudy, and Langa scooted his desk across the aisle so that he and Reki could study out of the same English textbook. The chaos in the classroom matched the rumbling in the sky overhead; everyone was crowding around their teacher, asking questions about the final exams, and Langa was daydreaming about his confession. It would be this weekend, he had decided, and he would wear the blue wave shirt that Reki liked, and invite him over for dinner. He would cook Reki's favorite food, and then afterward he would sit Reki down cross-legged in the middle of his bed, where they had cuddled so many times,

where Reki had kissed the nape of his neck, and he would say as clearly as possible that he adored Reki, and would Reki maybe please consider accepting his feelings?

Everything was in place. And Langa had even found a picture frame for the photo of them, a frame with painted snowboards that he had gotten at a gift shop in Canada, and maybe after the confession, he and Reki could search together for a matching frame with skateboards, for Langa's room. They would have matching photos by their beds, and matching plushies, and Langa's mom had shown him how to braid colorful string together into matching bracelets, the way they had braided each other's hair.

Langa clicked his pen, his face warm as Reki pressed their arms together, muttering, "So this word is…" Their feet shuffled together under the desk, and Langa tried to shove down the glowing feeling in his chest, thinking about how Reki might blush when his eyes skimmed over the confession letter, how he might blush when Langa bundled him into the soft, soft blanket with sleeves. They could both put their arms into the sleeves, he thought, clicking his pen again as Reki muttered to himself, and they could snuggle so close, and Langa would finally be allowed to whisper into Reki's heart all the things he loved about him…

He drifted off into the pleasant, sappy daydream of kissing the little scars on Reki's stomach, mumbling how much he liked each one of them while Reki squirmed underneath him, until the bell rang and Langa jolted up, face flushed. Reki nudged him.

"Having dirty thoughts in class?" he muttered, and Langa felt his ears turn red. He didn't say anything, because *god,* and then Reki cleared his throat, a choked sort of sound, and god, Langa didn't dare look at him. His face was already hot enough. Together they scrambled to their feet, straightening out the desks, and Langa busied himself stuffing the books into his backpack. Maybe he would grab Reki's backpack, too, he thought, and carry both of them, and maybe—

Reki jumped a little next to him, and Langa glanced up.

And, oh.

Before them stood Yua, her long hair tucked behind her ears, her hands clasped in front of her. She smiled, and Langa's chest clenched, because oh, she was so pretty, wasn't she? Her golden necklace glinted off nonexistent sunlight, her eyes soft at the corners, her cheeks

adorably round. God, why was she here? Had she come to take Reki away, maybe take his hand softly in her own, maybe bring him behind the school and whisper—

But Yua cleared her throat and said, “Langa-kun?”

Langa felt the color draining from his face. Yua was looking at him with a shy smile playing around her mouth, her cheeks tinged pink, and oh, god. Oh, no.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Yua asked, and oh no, oh no, oh no. Langa could feel his heart sinking in his chest, and he glanced helplessly at Reki, but Reki’s face had gone all closed off, his mouth a flat line, his feelings shuttered away. “Ah,” Yua said, and gave an embarrassed sort of laugh, the same breathless thing Reki did, and she ducked her head and rubbed at the side of her neck. “Um, alone?”

Langa could feel his hands going cold, his chest numb. He tried desperately to glance at Reki again, but Reki was zipping up his backpack, not looking at either of them, and Langa’s heart thumped. What could he say? He couldn’t say no, even though he wanted to, very badly, because oh god, oh god oh no.

Reki was going to be so hurt. Langa tried to swallow.

“Okay,” he said, and then there was nothing to do but follow her through the crowded classroom, weaving among girls and boys and boys and girls, losing Reki somewhere behind them. Langa tried to rub his cold hands on his pants, even though they weren’t sweating, because they were itching and trembling and god, god. Why this, why now? He had barely even spoken to Yua. He had never wanted to be alone with her.

She held open the door behind her, and Langa shivered in surprise at the powerful gust of cold wind. A storm must be blowing in, he registered dumbly, and it was chillier than he had expected, and he had to hug his arms in his thin button-down as he hurried after her. They were behind the school now, Yua’s long hair whipping around her in the wind, and Langa’s throat was dry, so dry because god. This was a confession spot, wasn’t it? He had known it would be, but still, god, it made his body shudder.

Why *now* ? Everything had been...everything had been going so well, and…

Yua turned around. She was a few feet away from him, and maybe Langa should stumble closer, because god maybe she had something to give him, a letter, maybe, or chocolates, god, hopefully nothing he couldn't throw away before Reki saw it. Langa tried to swallow again, but the storm had stolen away his breath, and he could only rock slightly in place, shoving his hands deep into his pockets to stop them from shaking.

"Wh—what is it?" he asked, wincing at the way his voice stuttered, and she cleared her throat again, trying to tuck her hair out of her face.

"I wanted to ask you something," she said, and god, god Langa's chest hurt, with how much it was throbbing against his bones. She was so beautiful, wasn't she? Even in the storm she was beautiful, just the way Reki was, something too soft and delicate to be affected by mundane things like weather.

Langa wasn't sure his voice would work. But he managed to get out, "What?" and she glanced at the ground between them, her hand still by her ear, holding her hair back.

"Is it true," she said, and then she cleared her throat. Dimly Langa realized she was nervous, fidgeting a little, tugging at her hair, and his heart thumped. The wind whipped around them, and she asked, quietly, "Is it really true that you're not...you're not dating Reki?"

Langa's mouth was dry, so dry. God. He had forgotten...he had forgotten that she asked Reki that, the night of the mixer. She had asked if he and Langa were together, and god. Reki had been so hurt. Langa tried to swallow, but he couldn't, so he just forced out, "We're not. Dating, I mean."

"Okay," said Yua, taking a breath, scuffing at the ground, and Langa took a breath, too, balling up his hands in his pockets, his chest straining as he waited for her to say it, *Langa-kun I really like you,* or *Langa-kun will you please go out with me,* and god, it would be such a painful rejection, not just for him but for Reki and his chest hurt so much just thinking about it, suffocating, and then Yua lifted her face and his heart clenched because—because her eyes were *shining* and then she said,

“Because I’m going to confess to him,”

and oh.

oh.

oh.

Oh. Langa felt the wind rocking his body, his hair caught in his mouth, but he couldn’t move, he couldn’t speak, he couldn’t even breathe because all he could see were the pale colors of her washed-out image, against the gray gray sky, the edges blurring white, and nothing was real except for the cold, cold wind and those words,

I’m going to confess to him.

To Reki.

The sky rumbled above them, like finality.

“What?” Langa managed to breathe out, the word escaping without his permission, because his head was empty of thoughts, his body was empty, everything was empty except for those words, pounding in his chest, again and again, painful against his breastbone. He knew he was breathing and he knew it hurt but he could barely feel anything except the pain in his heart. And Yua tucked her hair back again, her chest heaving once before she breathed out,

“Reki is—he’s *amazing,”*

and oh, oh, oh.

Langa closed his mouth, his throat so tight he couldn't breathe, he was suffocating because oh, the look on her face, the shining in her eyes, the way her mouth hesitated on the smile as if everything were too wonderful to comprehend, as if she didn't dare believe it was real.

It was the way he felt when he looked at Reki.

"He's so wonderful," she said, and she heaved another breath, half-excited half-nervous, and said, "I thought maybe he was already with somebody, because, because how could he not be, I mean, he's so sweet and caring and, ah—" She did that breathless laugh again and Langa's heart pressed against his ribs, painful, so tight and painful because god god god it sounded like Reki's laugh, "Ah, but that's why I wanted to ask you, if he's really single? Because I couldn't exactly ask him, you know."

Langa's mouth was cotton. The wind was so cold, so cold, and his limbs were numb and he couldn't feel his feet, he could only feel the knot around his breastbone, the tight breathless pain. Yua's face was so bright and expectant, and in her quivering smile he could see every daydream he had ever had, every night hugging his pillow and wiggling with the thought of hugging Reki, every early morning gazing in wonder at the sunrise and imagining seeing it with Reki someday. Langa couldn't breathe but he couldn't hate her, he couldn't hate any part of her, he understood her too well, he knew exactly the feelings that vibrated in her limbs because he *ached* with them.

He tried to clear his throat. The thought came to him: he could lie. Langa pushed it away. He would never lie, not about something so important, not about something that concerned Reki.

"Yeah," he said, and the words didn't seem to belong to him, they seemed to belong to the wind, blowing through their bodies, blowing something terrifying and powerful into the space between them. "He...he is single."

"Good," Yua breathed, and she pressed her hands to her cheeks, like she was trying to suppress her smile, and she laughed again, disbelievingly. Langa's body was stone. Only his heart was still beating. "I can't believe it! Oh. I was so afraid I was stepping in where I wasn't wanted. Ah, that's always what happens." She dropped her eyes to the ground, smiling, and Langa couldn't breathe, he couldn't even try to breathe, he could only stand stone still and stare at her, at her long dark hair flying in the wind, looking for a moment like wings. "He was telling me about this date he was planning, but then I never heard anything

about it so I thought maybe the other girl rejected him, and I felt so bad, but the way he talked about the date was so wonderful, and, oh." She clasped her hands again and lifted her face to him, her eyes curving up in a lovely smile, such a lovely smile and Langa was nothing but cold skin and hot chest pain. "Of course you know this stuff, because you're his best friend, but I just love how *deeply* he cares about things, you know? It's a bit overwhelming, thinking about him caring about a person that way."

The sky rumbled again, and Langa couldn't nod, he couldn't move to nod, but Yua was caught up in the thoughts of Reki, he could see it on her face, a terrible reflection of his own thoughts. She liked him. She liked him so much, and he could hear the trembling awe in her voice when she said,

"I love listening to him talk about the things he's passionate about, you know? And I just care about him so much. He's so tender inside, you can just tell, even though he wants to be so cool on the outside, and he finds a way to laugh about everything and I just know he's so strong. I just know he'd be such a wonderful boyfriend. Don't you think so?"

She was smiling, the storm going dark behind her, and Langa had no air, he had no words because the storm had stolen all of them, and she had stolen all of his feelings, an exact copy of his heart right out of his chest. His feet were rooted to the ground, so cold, so heavy because, because those were the things, those were the things he loved about Reki. Those were the things that made up *his* Reki, Langa's favorite person.

He had never wanted anyone else to see them.

Langa tried to take a breath. His throat was so tight, his chest tight, everything tight and constricted and so so so numb, because finally he saw the truth, the terrible honest truth. He had never wanted other people to see how wonderful Reki was; not like this. He had wanted to keep these precious things to himself. He had been secretly, guiltily, jealously glad that he was the only one who got to know Reki so deeply.

Langa was a horrible person.

And Reki deserved better.

“Yeah,” Langa said, his mouth dry, his throat cracked. “Yeah, he would be.” Yua beamed, bouncing a little in place, the way Reki did, and Langa tried to swallow. But he couldn’t. He didn’t have the air, and his body was slipping out of his grasp, his control on everything slipping, the white at the edges of his vision beginning to creep in again.

Reki deserved this. He deserved this love, the pure love on her face, in her clasped hands, he deserved to have her surge up to kiss him, he deserved her hands in his hair and her clothes on his bedroom floor, he deserved her holding his arm at graduation in so many beautiful photos, he deserved her kissing him in public, he deserved her face on the background of his phone and he deserved her lips on his cheek and he deserved her name in her mouth, so low and reverent, vibrating with how much she obviously cared about him.

He deserved her.

Langa wanted to swallow. He wanted to, but he couldn’t, and his feet wouldn’t budge, even when she took a step forward. “I made him chocolates,” she said, and carefully she brought a heart-shaped box out of her backpack, a tiny white tag hanging from the bow. She had scrawled Reki’s name in beautiful handwriting, nothing like the shaky words in Langa’s confession letter. “Ah—I was going to give them to him today, but I got too nervous, you know?” Her laughter was carried away by the wind, and Langa’s hands were so cold, so cold in his pockets, trapped by the fabric. “So that’s why I wanted to talk to you first.”

Langa tried to nod. Maybe he managed it, because she beamed again, sliding the chocolates into her bag, and then she lifted her clasped hands to her chest.

“Thank you, Langa-kun,” she said, her voice full of suppressed excitement, of love, as if she could already see her future laid out in front of her, the way her life was about to change, in indescribable ways, ways so wonderful that Langa couldn’t *breathe* thinking about them and and and

and

and then she said something else, but Langa could no longer hear, because the wind was whipping his hair into his mouth, and he was thinking of Reki packing up his life into the back of a moving van, Yua’s hand in his, he was thinking of Reki running back to give Langa one last hug before he left forever and and and

and

and

and Langa could feel the daydreams falling away, the image of their joined backyards crumbling, all his plans with Reki, all their nights cuddled up together, all their silly whispered words and their inside jokes and the way Reki could make him laugh with just a quick jab to the side, Reki's sweaty leg laying on top of his body as he let Langa call him *baby,* the joyful trembling feeling of holding him, and Langa could feel himself losing everything, everything falling apart so quickly he couldn't catch the images in time, to fit them back together, because of course Reki would leave. Of course Langa would no longer be his person.

Langa had lost.

"I'll see…" and Yua's voice was fading in and out in the wind… "tomorrow…" and Langa registered her waving, her face fragmenting in the whiteness, and then she was gone and it was only gray and white and Langa stood there, his chest so tight, the tightest ball of pain around his lungs, so tight it would never release, he would never be able to breathe, because he had lost, Yua had won and he had lost Reki.

Langa felt himself sinking to the ground. The asphalt was so cold through the seat of his pants, and dimly he felt the first drops of rain beginning to fall onto his cheeks, like tears, but Langa wasn't crying, Langa wasn't crying because his body was stone, his body was stone and his eyes were whiting out and he could only sit there, staring, staring at nothing.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so, so much for the lovely messages lately!! ahh I'm just going to spam this author's note with art links because y'all are so talented, so feel free to leave now if you wish~~~

nail polish scene by pearl-art on tumblr
carnival date by crystalrose.art on instagram
reki's crop top by sonderfairy on instagram
photobooth photos by sombrinii on instagram
langa's braid moment by artworkbyjoz on instagram
crop top boys by twilightsview on tumblr
more carnival date by soursoft on tiktok
and more crop top boys on my tumblr <3 as always thank you for reading! I really do appreciate it so much.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> trigger warnings: langa has some difficulty breathing throughout, although it might be difficult to skip (i'm very sorry). also, for mentions of langa's dad, skip the paragraph beginning "the doorknob slipping in his trembling hands," and also the paragraph beginning "the tears slipped down Langa’s cheeks, and he tried not to think of locking the doors of their home in Canada."
>
> I did cry while editing this, but I might just be melodramatic. please enjoy~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Langa’s shirt was soaked through. The rain poured down in dark, heavy sheets around him, and still he sat, staring at the puddles in the asphalt, the cold water running down his face. He was numb. Above him, the sky rumbled, and another powerful wind rocked Langa’s body, and he shuddered. His hands were numb, and his face was numb, and his heart was numb in his stone-frozen chest.

He was so very, very cold.

Langa squeezed his eyes shut. In the darkness he saw Reki, sitting bathed in sunlight on his bed, asking Langa to teach him how to kiss for the first time, a nervous smile on his face. In the darkness he saw Reki in his garage, sleeves rolled up, talking about his type in girls. In the darkness he saw those reminders on Reki’s phone, *ideas for my girlfriend,* in the darkness he saw Reki silhouetted against the sun on the top of a halfpipe, swinging his legs, telling Langa about his dad.

He said no girls would ever love me, he heard Reki say, with a strained laugh, *and, ah, I guess he was right, in the end.*

Langa’s fingers were cold and wet on the asphalt. He could feel every bump and ridge of the stone, he could feel the water running down between his fingers, he could feel them beginning to tremble.

Reki wanted so badly to be loved that sometimes he seemed raw, vulnerable.

And Langa was cold and stony and horrible for him.

He tried to open his eyes. But he couldn't, and his body paused, shuddering again in the wind, because oh, all he could see was darkness, he had been reduced to darkness, and oh god, oh god oh god. Langa tried to open his eyes, but he couldn't, and then he couldn't breathe, because oh god he was afraid. He tried and tried, his breath stuck in his throat, and god the darkness was closing in, and

oh god

Langa couldn't breathe, Langa was suffocating, Langa was going to die and he was going to die all alone in the cold, in the dark and and and

and another gust of wind rocked his body, toppling him over, and then Langa's eyes were open, staring up into the dark gray sky, the rain pelting down onto his face.

He sucked in a breath. God. Then he raised his shaking hands and pressed them to his face, trying to scrub away the cold water. He knew he was being ridiculous, lying on the ground in the rain, but his legs were so heavy and they refused to move and Langa could barely suck in enough air to keep his heart beating, his cold cold cold heart. He stared up at the moving clouds, the building storm, and he thought of himself and Reki scrambling behind the DopeSketch counter when it rained, sitting on the floor with their knees crowded close together, laughing. His chest ached. Reki always smelled like DopeSketch and summer and sweat, and his throat was always raspy and warm when he laughed, and Langa's days were going to feel so, so empty without him.

He rubbed his eyes. He tried not to think about his blankets losing the smell of Reki, he tried not to think about curling desperately around a pillow after too many nights without him, he tried not to think about aching to hold Reki's hand for just a moment, he tried not to think about asking to hold it, in a scratchy unused voice, and having Reki say gently, *Langa, we can't.* He tried not to think about Reki holding Yua's perfect tiny hand, rubbing his thumb over her smooth, unscabbed knuckles, he tried not to think about the two of them cuddled together on a crowded train, racing off toward a secret adventure while Reki texted Langa brief thumbs-up emojis, he tried not to think about them laughing at each other's silly inside

jokes, dropping ice cream into each other's laps. He swallowed, imagining Yua murmuring *Reki, baby,* the words that felt so good to say, the words that Langa ached to be allowed to say again, and oh, oh he should have said them more, and he swallowed because he had never thought everything would end so soon.

Lan ga tried to suck in air, but his lungs felt so tight and his chest felt so hollow, thinking about how wonderful it felt to be Reki's favorite person, how it made Langa's hardest days feel manageable, how it made him feel *wanted,* how soon those feelings would fade no matter how much he tried to stop them.

He struggled to sit up. It was hard; the asphalt was so rough under his wet palms and his shirt clung to him, heavy and cold, sticking to his skin and making him shiver, and once he was shivering he couldn't stop, he was trembling so hard and he couldn't feel it, he couldn't feel anything, and he felt a sob choking his throat, deep down where it hurt the most. Why was he so cold? Why—why was he so trapped in his mind, overthinking everything, desperately lonely, planning out his confession in so many panicked steps because he could never do anything right? Why couldn't he be like everybody else, running around joyfully and buying chocolates for their crushes, why was he *Langa,* and he could feel the sob rising and rising but he couldn't swallow it and he couldn't cry, he could only *shake,* his whole body shuddering, his hands flat on the ground, the rain pouring down around him.

Soon he was soaked to the bone, trembling so hard he couldn't see. He wasn't sure how he managed to get to his feet, except that then he was standing, blindly hurrying toward the school. He tried to wipe the water off his cold face but he couldn't, he couldn't, and even when he swallowed, the sob stuck painfully in the base of his throat.

The doorknob slipped in his trembling hands. He pulled hard, and the door wedged open, and then Langa scrambled inside, dripping onto the linoleum floor of the empty hallway. He sniffled, once, as the door clicked shut behind him, because it was just as cold inside as outside, and he was still dripping wet, and he was still shaking, and the school was empty. Reki must have left without him. Langa choked down the sob again, fishing for his phone in his backpack. He was alone, and he was shivering, and if he went home now, he would be alone in his empty apartment waiting for his mom, waiting on a cold empty couch because his mom would come home but his dad never would, and Langa tried to swallow, because *oh,* oh god.

His phone nearly slipped out of his hands, but Langa managed to grip it in his trembling fingers and turn it on. The screen lit up with seventeen missed texts from Reki.

hey dude i'm waiting outside

or

well i don't have to wait if you don't want

i mean if you wanna go home with her

do you like girls too? i guess i never asked

...don't answer that

hah

that was super inappropriate i'm sorry

anyway

it's been a while so i'm gonna assume you left

i'll be at my house if you wanna come by later

and y'know

you can tell me about what happened

i think S is cancelled anyway cause of the rain

it's too bad

i always win when it's raining

hahaha

Langa's wet fingers wouldn't work on the screen. He could barely breathe, trying to stop his hands from shaking, but he couldn't. Reki had no idea. Reki had no idea that tomorrow he would suddenly be presented with everything he had ever wanted, in a beautiful heart box with a bow, and of course it would be so much better than any clumsy confession Langa had imagined giving him. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the sobs building up in his chest, pressing painfully against his lungs, his throat. How had he been so stupid? How had he ever imagined Reki blushing over Langa's incoherent, stuttered words?

He stood there, rocking back and forth and trying to swallow, trying to choke down the lump rising in his throat, trying to fumble the phone back into his backpack with his cold fingers.

Somehow he managed to begin walking again, half-blind down the cold empty hallways, a faint tinny sound coming from the music room, and clumsily down the steps into the rain.

He clutched at his backpack. Reki was waiting for him, he thought, and the sob filled his throat again, no matter how hard Langa tried to choke it down. He splashed through a cold cold puddle and up onto the sidewalk, hurrying as fast as he could, his hands numb on the straps of his backpack, because Reki was bundled up somewhere in his warm garage, wearing a soft sweatshirt, working on his baby sister's bike and Langa could be there with him, maybe, maybe Reki would allow him to sit on the table and listen to his chatter like a warm fire on a cold day and, and, and Langa kept trying to swallow, but he couldn't, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't see, he could only hurry blindly down the street as fast as possible, his chest aching for Reki, Reki, Reki.

When he reached the house he almost couldn't knock. He just stood on the threshold, rocking, his hands taut by his sides because he was so cold and wet and he didn't want to move, and he could feel the water sliding down arms and, and, and he had to keep swallowing so he wouldn't cry because he didn't want to be left alone. He wanted to be held. He wanted Reki to hold him and stroke his hair and whisper that it would be okay, that nobody was abandoning Langa, and he felt the sob swelling in his throat again. Reki had always made him feel so safe, they had always held each other when they needed to cry. Without Reki, who would whisper that Langa was good enough, who would cradle him between their knees, who would pet his hair and make him tea and love him?

Langa swallowed and swallowed and swallowed, rocking. This was for Reki. He was not going to cry in front of Reki. He was going to be good, he was going to be happy and supportive for Reki, he was going to be Reki's best friend, nobody could take that away from him. With difficulty Langa knocked on the door, and he heard movement inside, and then the twins opened the door and peered up at him, and Langa swallowed again.

"Reki!" said one of the sisters in a high-pitched voice, running out of sight as the other one stuck her thumb in her mouth. "Langa came all the way here in the rain!"

Langa's throat hurt. His hands were trembling so badly, and when the other sister opened the door wider, he barely managed a "thank you" as he stepped inside, shivering. The door to the garage banged open, and then Reki was hurrying around the couch, the sleeves of his sweatshirt pushed up, and Langa wobbled on his weak knees because *god* Reki looked so warm and dry and good and Langa was, Langa was, Langa was—

“Jeez, man,” Reki was saying, grabbing his elbow, steering him around his sisters, and Langa followed mutely, his brain numb, his hands shaking. “Did you forget your umbrella? You should have told me, I would’ve kept waiting for you, I would’ve—” He broke off, shaking his head, opening the door to his room and crowding Langa inside. “Hang on, lemme get you a towel.”

Langa stood there, shivering, watching the rain pour down on Reki’s window. It was already growing darker outside, and he wanted to burrow into Reki’s bed, but how could he? He was all cold and wet and muddy from the run over and he wanted to cry, balling up his hands, pressing his fingernails into his dirty palms, because soon he would no longer be allowed to curl up in Reki’s bed. He squeezed his eyes shut again, rocking, his breathing labored, because he *couldn’t* cry, he *couldn’t* and then Reki’s voice was saying,

“Langa, hey, Langa, man, you okay? Hey, hey. Here, I got you a towel, you can dry off in the bathroom, okay? I’ll get you fresh clothes too. Here. Here.”

His hands were on Langa’s arms again, steering him back out of the room, down the hallway. He was warm, and Langa shuddered, because surely Reki could feel how damp and gross Langa was, how cold, and then Reki helped him into the bathroom and touched Langa’s jaw, lightly, trying to turn his head to face him.

Langa tried to blink. He tried and he tried and he tried, but it was hard to see much, because everything was blurry. “Langa,” said Reki, his voice low and soft. “Are you okay?”

Langa managed a nod. His eyes stung. Reki lingered for a moment, grabbing Langa’s wrist and squeezing before he closed the bedroom door. Langa tried to breathe. He tried to get himself together, his cold hands fumbling with the towel, rubbing his hair, peeling off his dripping button-down. The clothes Reki had given him were so soft that Langa wanted to sob. He just wanted to curl up under Reki’s blankets and let Reki pet his hair and whisper sweet nothings into the warm space underneath the comforter. He wanted Reki, his Reki, except he wasn’t his Reki anymore, and maybe he never would be again, and Langa’s chest ached with all the sobs he was holding back.

He managed to make it out of the bathroom without crying. He padded down the hallway and into Reki’s bedroom, his bare feet cold against the carpet, and, and, and oh, Reki was cross-legged in the middle of the bed, his sweatpants rolled up over his bony ankles and Langa

rocked on his feet because, because Reki looked so soft and warm. Oh. Oh, Langa wanted, he wanted to hug him, he wanted to sob out everything that had happened.

"C'mere," Reki said, holding out his arms, and Langa's heart nearly cracked. He wanted to throw himself at Reki, but he made himself walk slowly, he made himself count the steps over to Reki's bed, eight in total, he made himself look down at the blankets so he wouldn't look at Reki's face and blurt out everything.

Reki deserved to be happy. He deserved Yua and her sweet, lovely confession and Langa shouldn't fuck it all up for him. He tried to swallow. His throat hurt, and his chest hurt, and his toes hurt from the cold.

"Langa," said Reki softly, reaching up to tug gently at the sleeve of the shirt, which was too small for Langa, and Langa's mouth wobbled. "Are you okay? What do you need?"

And, oh. Why did Reki have to be so *good?* Langa's throat tightened, because he was already trying so hard not to cry. "Can I sit?" he managed, and Reki shuffled over immediately, patting the bed next to him, and Langa sat down gingerly, pressing his hands together in his lap. He wanted to be under the blankets. He was so cold, but it would be too much to ask for, it would be selfish, and he had already asked Reki for so much. Swallowing hurt. Langa couldn't get past the horribly painful lump in his throat.

"Did she," Reki started, and then stopped. When he began again, he sounded stilted, awkward. "Did she confess to you?"

Langa shook his head. Reki cleared his throat, shifting on the bed so that his knees pressed against the side of Langa's thigh, and he tugged gently on one of Langa's wrists. Langa's eyes blurred, because oh, Reki's palm was so warm, and he let Reki have his hand, he let Reki press their palms together and lace his fingers with Langa's and oh, oh, oh.

Langa clung onto his hand, because his palm was *so warm* and it felt so good and oh, oh it was so difficult not to cry. Langa blinked, hard, and then again and again, trying to hold back the tears. Reki's hand was so *soft.*

“What did she—” Reki began, but Langa squeezed his fingers, *please please don’t ask,* and Reki broke off, shuffling on the bed again, putting his other hand on Langa’s shoulder. “Okay. Hey, man, it’s okay. If she said something mean to you, we’ll just—we’ll just get through it together, okay? You can tell me later. Or never. Do you wanna watch something on my phone?”

Langa swallowed again and again and nodded. Then, because he didn’t want Reki to hate Yua, he forced out, “She wasn’t...mean. It’s. Something else.”

“Okay,” said Reki, and Langa managed,

“It wasn’t her,”

and Reki nodded, squeezing his hand, and god, god, Langa clung on as tightly as he could. Maybe this would be the last time they could ever hold hands, and oh, his eyes stung, and he tried not to choke when he swallowed. He had enjoyed it so much. The warmth of Reki’s palm, the rough edges of his callouses, the way holding his hand made Langa feel so *safe*... he had to swallow again. How had he taken it for granted? How had he not appreciated enough all the ways that Reki had held him and cuddled him and pressed their cheeks together, all the times that he had held Langa’s hand for hours and hours, how had he not braced himself to lose it all someday?

Soon Reki would be holding Yua’s hand instead. Langa’s throat ached, so much, as he crawled after Reki to the top of the bed, settling against the pillows, watching blearily as Reki set up YouTube on his phone. It was a video they had watched several times before, about people wiping out in shopping carts outside of a Canadian grocery store, and normally it was one of the only videos that made Langa laugh.

His chest ached even more. On the little sidebar he could see that the video was one of fifty in a playlist simply titled, *for langa.*

“Okay?” said Reki, settling against him, draping his warm arm over Langa’s shoulders. Langa swallowed, and then he swallowed again, because oh, he wanted so badly to curl up into Reki’s side, to press his face against Reki’s shoulder, to snuggle into him. He wanted to be under the blankets. But he made himself nod, watching Reki press play, holding his hand tightly even though he knew he should let go, he should stop pretending to be Reki’s

boyfriend. They were only friends, nothing more, and so Langa should stop clutching his hand like this, he should. He should. He told himself he would. He told himself he could only have thirty more seconds.

He stared blindly at the screen as the first guy flew down the pavement in a rickety shopping cart with only three wheels. He watched the little timer ticking. When thirty seconds passed Langa had to swallow, hard, because he couldn't make his fingers move, he couldn't let go of Reki's hand. How could he? This was the last time Langa would be able to hold his hand, he should cherish the warm press of Reki's palm, he needed to memorize the feeling of Reki's calloused fingers so he would never forget.

Again he could feel himself sucking in air. Reki paused the video, tilting his head, bringing his hand up to smooth Langa's hair out of his face. "Dude," he said quietly. "Are you sure you don't wanna talk about it?"

Langa closed his eyes, breathing out shakily. He shook his head, but Reki pulled him closer, guiding his head down until Langa's cheek was pressed to his shoulder. Langa knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help it, he curled up his body, pressed against Reki's side, and Reki made a quiet humming sound, running his hand through Langa's hair.

"M'afraid you're gonna catch a cold," Reki said, low. "From being out in the rain like that."

Langa shuddered, and then, and then Reki was shuffling around on the bed, tugging the comforter free from underneath their bodies, and Langa nearly whimpered when Reki pulled it over them, tucking it around Langa's shoulders. Oh god. God. It was so warm. And Langa was shivering so much.

"You're freezing," Reki murmured, smoothing Langa's hair off his forehead again, and Langa shivered again, burrowing deeper under the blanket, because god, it was like a warm hug, just the press of the fabric against his body. Reki squeezed his hand. "Okay, man? You good?" His voice was so soft. "You can talk if you want, y'know."

Langa squeezed his eyes closed, because he didn't want to, he didn't have anything to say. All his words had been stolen away by Yua, her voice so happy in the rush of horrible wind. With difficulty he opened his eyes, peering into Reki's face, and god, his heart thumped painfully against his chest. Reki was so close. His breathing was warm against Langa's face, and his nose bandaid was peeling at the corners, and his stubby eyelashes were bent at funny

angles. Langa could see the places on his left cheek where Reki had cut himself trying to shave and he swallowed, and he swallowed, and he swallowed because oh, oh, oh.

"It's okay," said Reki, softly, tracing the edge of Langa's jaw, and oh his hand was so gentle. "You don't have to talk, okay? Is there anything else? Something I can do?"

And, oh, Langa shouldn't say anything, he shouldn't, he knew he shouldn't but now he could see Reki's mouth, the little place at the corner where his teeth had torn away the skin, the dent in the center of his bottom lip, and oh, oh, Langa would never get to kiss him again, he had lost, and he had to swallow again because he had loved it so much, the soft press of Reki's mouth when he was hurting. "Can I," and he had to pause to gulp down the sobs, because please, please he just needed *Reki,* "can I kiss you? I just, I'm just feeling bad right now and I…"

"Langa," said Reki, hauling him closer, and Langa's chest heaved, and Reki's thumb rubbed over his cheek, gentle, so gentle. "Hey, hey, of course. Here. C'mere." He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to Langa's cheek, so soft, and Langa tried to swallow, clutching at Reki's hand, because oh, oh, oh. Reki's lips were so gentle, the way they moved carefully against his face, the way he kissed Langa's undereye bags and his nose, and Langa nearly sobbed, because oh Reki smelled good and his mouth felt so *nice.* And then Reki stretched up and smoothed away Langa's hair and pressed his mouth to Langa's forehead, right where his eyebrows furrowed, and Langa felt the warm fuzzy feeling spread through his whole body and he curled his toes, squeezing his eyes shut.

Reki always *knew,* god, god, Reki always knew what he needed and Langa wanted to cry because it wasn't *fair,* it wasn't fair, he just wanted to be kissed this way every day for the rest of his life, by *Reki,* he just wanted Reki to smooth his hair back clumsily and kiss his forehead.

His breathing was labored, shaky, when Reki came back down to kiss his cheeks again, his thumb massaging at Langa's temple, and Langa fisted his hand in the blanket, trying not to blurt out how badly he wanted Reki to kiss his mouth, how much he would treasure it, the way he had never known to treasure it before. Before, they had always kissed with a hopeful promise of tomorrow, a next time, and Langa had always adored the feeling of Reki's lips but he had never tried hard enough to hang onto the feeling. He sucked in a shaky breath, and Reki touched the corner of his mouth with the rough edge of his thumb and whispered, "You want...you want me to kiss...here?" Carefully he pressed the pad of his thumb to the center of Langa's mouth.

Langa exhaled, and god, god it felt like he was giving up everything with that single breath out, and he could only manage, “Yes...please,” and Reki made a soft, mumbling sound in his throat. He shuffled closer, his palm squeezing Langa’s, and then his eyes fluttered closed and he was kissing Langa and oh, oh.

Oh, his mouth was *so warm,* so warm against Langa’s cold lips and scratchy with the dry skin and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, because oh, he was going to cry, he could feel Reki breathing out against him and he tried to swallow because oh, oh, oh he was going to sob against Reki’s mouth because Reki was so *gentle.* Reki rubbed his thumb over Langa’s knuckles, tilting his head, pulling away softly and then reconnecting their mouths, seamless, again and again as if he knew exactly what Langa needed, soft kisses on the mouth as if he was precious, as if he was loved, and god, god, oh Langa wanted them to love each other so badly.

He fisted his hand in the blankets, tilting his head desperately, feeling the way Reki’s bottom lip fit perfectly into the seam of his lips, the way each kiss was a bit off-center, no kiss exactly the same, and oh how would Langa ever memorize a feeling so overwhelming? His whole body was burning with it, his heart swelling against his chest, his fingers trembling with the effort of holding on so tightly, trying to keep his eyes squeezed closed and his lips soft against Reki’s. When Reki touched his mouth with his thumb again, Langa whimpered, he couldn’t help himself, and Reki whispered, “Shh, shh,” and rubbed his thumb over Langa’s cheek. “You good?”

Langa swallowed and nodded, desperate, without opening his eyes because if he opened them maybe Reki would pull away, and he would never kiss Langa again, everything would end, and Langa knew he would start sobbing, so he fisted his hand in Reki’s t-shirt and tugged, a quick wordless *please?* and Reki made a quiet sound, shifting on the bed. This time he cupped Langa’s face in his hand, his warm palm pressed to Langa’s cheek and Langa choked back another whimper because *oh,* oh it felt so good when Reki cradled his face like that, he was *so good* and Langa had to swallow back a sob because god he missed him already, he would ache every day for Reki to hold his face this way, and then Reki dipped down and pressed their mouths together again and Langa clutched at his t-shirt for dear life, trying and trying and trying to pour all his love into that one deep kiss.

Reki’s fingers slipped into his hair. “Langa,” he mumbled, against Langa’s mouth, and Langa whimpered again, and Reki kissed him softly as if in apology, rubbing his thumb over Langa’s temple again. “S’okay,” he whispered, “it’s gonna be okay,” and Langa swallowed back another sob because Reki had no idea, he had no idea this was the last time they would ever kiss each other, he had no idea that Langa was desperately trying to memorize the way

Reki's fingers felt in his hair, massaging gently over his scalp, he had no idea how much Langa was going to hug his pillow and cry over the memory of Reki's soft lips pressed to his own. Clumsily Langa tried to tilt his head and kiss better. Maybe if he could kiss good enough, maybe Reki would choose him, maybe Reki would be willing to choose Langa with his broken brain and his shaky hands and his stuttered words, maybe Reki would allow him a few more afternoons like this, wrapped up in blankets that smelled like summer and home with the rain pattering on the windows.

They separated with a little gasp and then Reki kissed the corner of his mouth, mumbling something, maybe *Langa,* and Langa tried not to whimper again because oh, oh it was so hard not to start crying, but if he was crying then Reki wouldn't kiss him anymore, and Langa wasn't ready for the kissing to end. He trembled as Reki squeezed his hand, their ankles bumping under the blankets, and Reki rubbed his thumb over Langa's cheek. "Langa, man," he whispered, the words warm against Langa's mouth, "you're shaking. Are you sure...are you sure you're okay?"

Langa swallowed and nodded, and when Reki didn't say anything right away, Langa cracked his eyes open, and god Reki was so close and he had that little crease forming between his eyebrows, and Langa swallowed again. "Reki," he managed, his voice cracking on the word, because god it was the only word he wanted to say for the rest of his life, and Reki's warm cheeks flushed a bit warmer at the sound, and Langa squeezed his hand tightly, so tightly. He wanted to make Reki blush over the sound of his name, oh, oh, he wanted to snuggle Reki deep into the blankets and the pillows and climb on top of him and just *shower* his face with little kisses and compliments until Reki was blushing all over, but he had to swallow hard because he couldn't do that, he wasn't the one who got to do that anymore, and he had to squeeze Reki's hand even tighter because suddenly his throat was filling up because

because

because he was imagining Yua kissing Reki, Yua getting to tuck Reki's hair behind his ears and hearing his scratchy voice in between breathless kisses, getting to see the way his ears always went red over whispered praise and Langa had to swallow and swallow and swallow because *oh.* He had never wanted anybody else to know those things. His chest burned and his eyes burned because *oh,* oh he wanted to clutch those things close to his heart, he wanted to know those secrets about Reki and he wanted to share his own embarrassing secrets with Reki, the way he panted in between kisses, the way he gripped Reki's fingers too tightly,he wanted to keep those things safe and precious in the warm little room.

He swallowed hard. Reki stroked Langa's cheeks, his eyebrows creased, and oh Langa loved that little wrinkle between his eyebrows when he got all worried and concerned. He swallowed again, his chest burning, and then he stretched up, pressing his mouth shakily to the tiny crease on Reki's forehead. Reki huffed out a surprised breath, squeezing Langa's hand, and Langa's heart thumped because *oh* Reki's skin was so sweet and warm and it felt good, it felt good to kiss him this way. He kissed Reki's forehead again, because he loved him, and then again because maybe he could never kiss him again, and then a third time because Reki made a soft noise and *oh* Langa just wanted him to feel warm and good.

"Langa," Reki whispered, his voice a little high on the word, squeezing his hand, "Langa, Langa."

Langa settled back into the pillows again, breathing out, and this time Reki pulled him closer, tangling their ankles together under the blankets, his arm sliding snug around Langa's waist to hold him close, and Langa felt his mouth wobble dangerously. And no, no, no he couldn't cry, so he whispered in this cracked voice, "Can I kiss you again please?" and Reki's cheeks went redder and he nodded. Langa's chest burned with *thank you thank you thank you* as he pressed close, kissing the corner of Reki's mouth clumsily, and then the beautiful little dent in his bottom lip, the dent he had daydreamed about for days, soft fantasies where he stumbled into an apartment kitchen early on a Sunday morning and hugged Reki from behind, kissing him good morning with dry lips, and oh oh oh if Langa could only have *one more day* with Reki he would never ever ask for anything else.

But eventually they had to pull away again, to breathe, and Langa could feel the way the breaths stuck in his chest, painful to force out, and Reki was rubbing his back, careful along Langa's spine. "You're upset," Reki whispered, not a question, and Langa swallowed and shook his head against the pillows, tears stinging his eyes. He had to release Reki's shirt to rub at his face, but he managed to swallow the worst of the sobs.

"No," he said, because oh this wasn't fair, it wasn't fair of him to sob in front of Reki, to ruin Reki's beautiful first confession. He tried and tried to clear his throat, tangling his fingers in Reki's shirt again, and Reki rubbed the dip of Langa's back gently, gazing at him with his perfect beautiful eyes full of worry and Langa just wanted to kiss his eyelids, his eyebrows and the tiny scar under his right eye, but instead he forced out, "I just, I just want, I just want us to be friends always."

Reki swallowed. "We will be," he said, but there was something strained in his voice, and Langa's throat and chest tightened, with pain and fear, because oh, oh did Reki not want to? No, no, nonono, Langa needed him, Langa needed to be able to keep seeing him, if not every

day then every week at least, please, please he needed Reki in his life and he could feel his eyes brimming with tears again because no no no please, and Reki swallowed again and said hurriedly, “Langa, Langa, we will be. Okay? We’ll always be friends, okay? Best friends.”

Langa felt the tears slipping out of his eyes and frantically he rubbed at them, choking down the horrible lump rising in his throat, and he gasped out, “Okay,” and Reki squeezed him around the waist.

“Is that what you’re worried about?” he asked, his voice low and careful. “Langa, I’m not going anywhere. I’m always gonna be right here, for you, okay, no matter what...what you want.”

Langa could barely swallow, but he managed to nod, because Reki was so good, he was so good, Langa would be so empty and lost without him, and Reki had made his days so full and happy and bright, he had taught Langa how to laugh again, he had taught Langa so many things, and Langa clutched at his hand and his t-shirt and tried to breathe. Reki rubbed his back and breathed in, a little shaky, and then said,

“I’m here, Langa,”

and when Langa breathed out it sounded almost like a sob and Reki wrapped his arm more fully around him, pulling him in, and Langa buried his face in Reki’s shoulder.

“I’m always gonna be here,” Reki whispered, into his hair, stroking his back. “I’ll be here as long as you want me, okay?”

Langa breathed in, as deeply as he could, and nodded and clutched at him, feeling Reki’s thudding heartbeat through their shirts, Reki’s shaky breathing, and oh, Langa hadn’t meant to make Reki feel bad. He screwed up his eyes, pressing them against Reki’s shoulder, trying to control his breathing because he knew if he started sobbing, he would never be able to stop, and he would probably gasp out the whole horrible story, the beautiful box of chocolates that Yua had made for him, the perfect way she had written Reki’s name on the tag. Reki would only feel guilty if Langa hunched into a ball on his bed and sobbed out how much he wanted Reki to choose him, to *please* choose him. Reki would feel guilty and awkward, and he would have to turn Langa down, and then maybe things would never be the same between them.

Langa lifted his head, sucking in air, trying to smother the feelings swelling in his chest. He wanted things to be the same. He wanted them to be able share bentos at lunch, even if Yua sat with them, he wanted them to skate together in the setting sun, even if Reki had to pat his back and leave for a date an hour early, he wanted them to hang out on Reki's bed watching skating videos, even if they could never crawl under the blankets like this again.

He tried to breathe. He wanted them to be the same. He wanted them to be friends, and if they were going to be friends, then *this*... this had to end.

With difficulty Langa pulled back. He could feel his chest heaving, his breath stuck in his lungs, and his throat hurt, his throat hurt so badly because he was in love with Reki, and he had never been allowed to tell him. He had daydreamed so much this week about finally being able to get his mouth around those words, *I'm in love with you, Reki,* and now he would never know how they sounded, and he had to swallow, hard. Reki was watching him, his eyelashes tangled together, his mouth parted slightly on his own shaky breathing.

"Reki," Langa said, but then his throat closed up because god, god he wasn't sure he could go on. He swallowed, hard, trying not to look at Reki's mouth, Reki's perfect mouth, the mouth that Langa had kissed so many times and never stopped yearning to kiss again. "Reki, I…"

"Yeah?" Reki whispered back, squeezing Langa's fingers, his other hand pressing into the small of Langa's back and Langa tried to choke back a whimper. He felt so warm and safe cuddled under the blankets, and he wanted to stay that way forever, he never wanted this to end.

Langa squeezed his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to see Reki's face when he whispered, "You know the...the practicing thing? Where we kiss and stuff?"

Reki's voice was strained when he said, "Yeah?"

Langa breathed out, shaky. "I think we need to stop...doing that."

He could hear the rush of wind against the window, he could feel the way Reki's hand twitched on his back. Then Reki pressed his palm to Langa's t-shirt again, and Langa tried not to shudder because he wanted Reki's arms around him forever and ever and then Reki breathed out, taking his hand away, taking his arm off Langa's body, and oh, Langa's side was so cold and empty, and he opened his eyes, watching helplessly as Reki rubbed his mouth, glancing away.

"So…" Reki said, and then he huffed out a breath, his face red, his eyes squinting up. "So no more kissing and stuff?"

Langa's throat was tight, and his body was starting to tremble again, because oh, oh why had Reki stopped hugging him? He *needed* to be hugged right now, and Reki looked so flushed and hurt, and Langa *ached* to wrap his arms around him, comforting, but it was too late, he had already told Reki things were over, and it was so hard to breathe but he managed to get out, "Yeah...yeah."

Reki rubbed his face, his eyebrows scrunching together, and then he huffed out another breath, dragging the collar of his sweatshirt up over his chin. "Okay," he said, and then sucked in a breath and exhaled. "Okay okay okay cool. Okay. That's okay. That's cool, man, you...you did it for long enough anyway. Hah. Sorry. I didn't expect...I mean, I mean, I guess, I guess I should say thank you, huh?"

His voice was so shaky and strained and Langa's chest ached, so badly. Had he upset Reki? But Reki would understand tomorrow, why Langa had done it, why Langa had stepped away even though his whole body was burning for him to stay. He shook his head, his face hot against the pillow, his body still trembling with how badly he wanted Reki to hold him again. It had felt so good and safe and now Langa was so cold all over again. "You don't have to…" His voice was so scratchy. He tried to clear his throat. "You don't have to thank me."

"Nah," mumbled Reki, rubbing his mouth again. He pressed his knuckles against his face, his eyes squinched up, and god, god he wouldn't even *look* at Langa and Langa's heart was throbbing so painfully against his ribs. "Nah, I mean it. It was...it was really nice of you, to help me."

Langa tried to swallow. Reki's face was half-hidden by the sleeve of his sweatshirt, and the rain rushed against the window again before slowing down again, and the lump was rising in Langa's throat again because, because things were really over, weren't they? If Yua had never

pulled him behind the school, they could have had a couple more hours together, they could have cuddled some more and laughed a little and maybe Langa would have been allowed to kiss Reki's dimples. He swallowed, hard, his eyes burning, because oh he wanted to kiss Reki's pretty red cheeks and the faded lines of his dimples and now he never could. He had lost. He squeezed Reki's hand, and Reki pulled his face out of his sleeve to glance down at their hands, and all of a sudden Langa couldn't breathe.

Oh.

Oh, they would have to stop holding hands, now.

He tried to swallow. But he couldn't. The tears were brimming in his eyes again because oh, oh, oh, he had loved holding Reki's hand *so much,* all the times they had clung to each other, that whole entire day at the carnival, their palms pressed together, sweaty fingers tangled up with each other. It had always made Langa feel so secure, like nobody could take his Reki away, but now he would have nothing to hold onto, he would have to keep his hands balled up in his pockets all the time. What if he forgot and accidentally reached for Reki? What if Reki brushed him away and, and, and Langa could feel the tears sliding down his face as he stared at their clumsy, bandaged hands clinging to each other.

Reki slowly rubbed his thumb over Langa's knuckles. He hesitated, like he wanted to say something, but he didn't, he just eased his grip, and Langa's eyes blurred as he watched Reki untangle their fingers, leaving Langa's hand on the pillow.

They couldn't hold hands anymore.

Langa could feel the tears slipping down his cheeks. Awkwardly Reki patted his hand, once, and god, god Langa was crying. He was crying, and he tried so hard to swallow back the tears, rubbing his eyes with his wrists. Reki patted his elbow, too, clearing his throat, and said quietly, his voice rough, "Are you okay?"

Langa nodded, swallowed, gulping down the sobs even though he wanted to take it all back, he wanted to burrow down under the blankets with Reki and cling to him until the very last moment when he had to let Reki go. He wanted to hold Reki's hand again. He wanted Reki's palm pressed to his own, he wanted to cry while he kissed Reki's fingers, every one of his

beautiful fingers. “I’m supposed to go home,” Langa managed. “My mom wants...she wants to talk to me about going to the doctor.”

He had forgotten until now. Everything felt so far away, his panic attack in the hotel, his apartment, his mother, his therapist back in Canada. Reki swallowed, red-faced, looking down at the pillows. “Okay,” he said, and then cleared his throat again. “Can I...can I walk you out?”

Langa nodded. His throat hurt, and his chest hurt, and he didn’t want to get up, he didn’t want to leave their safe little cocoon under the blankets, where they would never be able to cuddle again. He wanted so badly for Reki to hold him again, just for a few more minutes, just until Langa got his breathing under control again because his chest was so tight, his chest was tight and his hands were trembling and he didn’t want to go home, he didn’t want to leave.

He didn’t want things to end.

But Reki was already sitting up, slowly, tossing the comforter off of them and Langa shivered, and Reki glanced at him. “Do you want a sweatshirt?” he asked, his voice cracking a little. “You look...you were so cold, earlier.”

Langa shivered again. Without Reki next to him, everything felt scarier, even the thought of walking home in the drizzling rain to his cold, quiet apartment. His throat was thick, and he had to hold himself back from begging Reki to please walk him home, to please bring Langa inside his apartment and make sure he was safe on the couch with a blanket around his shoulders before leaving him. But he couldn’t do that. He swallowed. “Yes, please,” he said, and Reki rubbed his face, shuffling clumsily off the bed.

Reki took a couple of minutes choosing a sweatshirt out of the closet. Langa’s legs were so numb and stiff when he stood up, and he tried to tangle his hands in the hem of his t-shirt, but they wouldn’t stop trembling. He had never imagined...he swallowed hard. He had never imagined that this was how things would end. He had never imagined that *he* would be the one to end things. He had always had that aching little flame of hope in his chest, like maybe things would never have to end at all, like maybe they could go on and on forever.

The flame was dying now.

Reki turned around. Langa tried to clear his throat. He knew his face was damp from the tears he had scrubbed away, and Reki looked red, too, his knuckles white with how tightly he was gripping the soft red sweatshirt in his hands. Langa swallowed, glancing at the floor, because he knew that was one of Reki's favorite sweatshirts, one of his comfort sweatshirts for bad days. Langa tried not to cry. Even now Reki was trying to give him comfort in the only way he knew how.

"Here," said Reki, his voice scratchy, stepping closer and pressing the sweatshirt into Langa's hands. "I...I wore it yesterday but only for a minute. So it's mostly clean."

Langa tried to swallow again. Clumsily he pulled the sweatshirt over his head, his face getting stuck in the hoodie, and he imagined Reki's hands on the hem, helping him tug it down. Then his head slid out of the top, his hair damp and ruffled, and he could feel the soft soft fabric hugging his limbs and oh, oh, his throat was filling up again because the hoodie *smelled* like Reki.

It smelled like sweat and the back room of DopeSketch and Reki's shampoo and Langa wanted to cry. He was trying *so hard* to leave, and now...now *this.*

He buried his face in the collar for a moment, trying to breathe in, trying to swallow down the tears burning his eyes. He rocked a little, because god it was so soft and warm and just yesterday Reki had snuggled into it, and it *smelled* like him, like home and safety and Langa wanted to hug him so badly. "Is it okay?" asked Reki, in a small voice, such a small voice and Langa raised his head and nodded.

Reki cleared his throat and rubbed his cheek. Langa tried not to look at the dent in his bottom lip or the band-aid wrapped around his thumb because, god, he wanted to kiss both of them. Then Reki touched him on the elbow with his warm, warm hand and guided him toward the door, and Langa stumbled after him, through the house that he had begun to think of as his home, and he swallowed and swallowed, eyes burning. He had held Reki in his lap on that couch, his arms wrapped around Reki's waist, and he had laughed into his mouth and they had been so happy, so happy.

His throat ached as Reki opened the front door. The rain had slowed, but the heavy gray clouds hung low in the darkness, the puddles black against the pavement. Langa swallowed,

stumbling over the threshold, the cold wind catching his hair and whipping it around his face, and Reki turned him around, putting his hands on both of Langa's elbows, looking up at him.

Even underneath the rumbling storm Reki looked so soft, his forehead creased up, his mouth twisted to the side, and Langa swallowed at the ache in Reki's eyes, the way he searched Langa's face, as if looking for some kind of answer Langa couldn't give him. He watched, helplessly, as Reki swallowed, his throat bobbing, and then he said, his voice scratchy, "Hey, Langa. I know you said… I know you said we had to stop, but…"

Langa's throat burned, even in the cold cold wind whipping around him, because *god* he didn't want to stop. "Yeah," he managed, but Reki made a face and said, quietly, so so quietly,

"Yeah, but can I… I mean, would it be okay if I… if I… I mean, just one last time?"

Langa swallowed. Oh, he thought, oh.

Reki wanted to kiss him goodbye.

The wind was so cold, tossing their hair wildly into the air, and the yellow of the house behind him was so warm, and Langa swallowed, trying not to shiver. They could kiss one final time, and Langa's hands shook, because oh, how could he ever stuff all of his feelings into only *one* kiss? He had so much love for Reki that he *trembled* with it, and he would never have another chance to show him, and he needed to make sure Reki understood how wonderful he was, how lovable.

He swallowed. His voice was so cracked and dry when he said, "Yeah, it's, it's okay."

Reki rubbed his mouth with his wrist, his cheeks a flush of red in the darkness, and he leaned in, squeezing Langa's elbows. When their mouths met, it was clumsy and wet, and Reki tilted his face just a little, pressing deeper, something desperate in the way he rocked on the balls of his feet. Langa squeezed his eyes shut, because oh oh oh, Reki's mouth was *so warm,* even in the cold, the last warm thing left in the world, and he tried not to whimper at the way Reki exhaled shakily into the kiss, without pulling away.

Oh, oh. Langa clutched at his arms, because it was so sweet, kissing Reki, it was sweet even though it was ending. Langa felt the wet slide of Reki's bottom lip as he breathed out again, his hands coming up to cup Langa's face, both of his palms against Langa's cheeks. The lump rose in Langa's throat again, and he felt the tears swelling in his eyes because Reki's hands were trembling against him, Reki was shaking but he was still so good, so good and Langa couldn't believe this was the last time he would ever kiss him.

He had loved it so much.

Reki pulled away, puffing air against Langa's lips, and Langa squeezed his eyes shut, clutching Reki's arms tightly. *No, please,* he wanted to beg, as the cold wind blew through him again, *please please one more time,* and then Reki mumbled quietly, "One more time?" like he had heard Langa's thoughts and Langa nodded desperately and they kissed again, their teeth bumping together, Reki's hands tight on Langa's face.

Langa wanted to sob. He could feel tears sliding down his face again, because god Reki's mouth felt good, his warm palms felt good, kissing him was *so good* and Langa clutched at his sleeves, trying to kiss him and gulp back sobs at the same time. Reki tilted his face the other way, his fingers pressing into Langa's jaw, and oh Langa was crying because he had always loved when Reki held him this way, his palms against Langa's face. Reki exhaled shakily against his mouth again, and oh, oh Langa swallowed and kissed him again, desperate, because how could something so beautiful be ending?

Maybe, maybe all beautiful things had to end.

The tears slipped down Langa's cheeks, and he tried not to think of locking the doors of their home in Canada, all the beautiful memories ruined, he tried not to think of the long walk to school without Reki, he tried not to think about the reminders deleted off Reki's phone, their photobooth photos in the trash somewhere, the carnival gifts stuffed into a drawer because they made Langa's throat ache too much, looking at them. He tried not to think about his blue nail polish chipping away, no matter what Langa did, little by little until the mark of Reki was completely gone, until Langa's hands were ugly and cold and empty once again.

Reki pulled away again. Langa was shaking, and his face was cold with tears, and when he opened his eyes he could see that Reki's eyes were wet, too, and his chest clenched, so tight

he couldn't breathe. "Okay," Reki whispered, his voice strained, "Okay, I'm done. Thank...thank you."

Langa couldn't breathe. He was done? Couldn't — couldn't they kiss one more time? Please, he thought, desperately, please, just one more time, but Reki was already easing his hands off Langa's face, patting his shoulders, and Langa's throat was so tight it hurt.

"You're a good guy, Langa," Reki said, quietly. "Somebody's gonna be….really lucky to have you."

Langa tried to swallow. More tears were burning his eyes, and he wanted to choke out, *no,* he wanted to clutch at the front of Reki's shirt, he wanted to stumble back inside and close the door and sink down on the floor of Reki's warm, safe house and sob. But he was the one who had ended things. It was his fault, so he made himself swallow and then he glanced at Reki's mouth one last time before choking out, "Okay."

"Okay," said Reki, and he breathed out shakily, squeezing Langa's shoulders before dropping his arms. "Text me when you get home safe, okay?"

Langa could only stare desperately at him. He had to leave now, he knew he did, but he didn't want to, he was already shaking so much. "Okay," he managed, and then Reki was stepping backward, and Langa's throat choked up, because oh god oh god Reki was going to close the door on him, Reki was going to lock him out, in the wind and the cold and Langa was going to be alone, but then Reki said, softly,

"It's okay, Langa,"

and Langa managed to swallow down the swell of panic. He stumbled down the sidewalk, through the darkness, away from Reki's home where he had learned to skate and to make toaster waffles and to kiss, where he had learned how to love.

He glanced back, his feet catching in a cold, wet puddle at the edge of the street. Reki hovered in the doorway, watching him, a silhouette against the bright, warm lights of his home, but Langa couldn't see his face, he could barely remember his face. He swallowed and

he swallowed and he swallowed, and the darkness seemed to close in around him, suffocating.

Maybe, maybe Reki would run after him, and Langa hesitated at the end of the sidewalk, his hand on the cold edge of Reki's face, waiting for Reki to hop down the steps and fly down the path into his arms, so Langa could cry into his shoulder and kiss his dimples, so Langa could love him but Reki just leaned heavily against the doorframe, and Langa swallowed down a sob as that final hope died, too.

Langa's hands shook so badly he could barely unlock his apartment. Inside was cold and dark, a leak dripping in the kitchen, and Langa sucked in a tight breath, swallowing hard. He had managed to make it here without crying, and soon his mom would be home, and then maybe Langa could collapse into her arms and sob out the whole, horrible story.

He fumbled through the apartment without turning on the lights. The wind was knocking branches against the window, and Langa shuddered, trying not to remember waiting alone in his parents' big, empty bed during a windy night just like this, the night before the world ended. He twisted the handle of his bedroom door and stumbled inside and then, and then, and then,

Oh.

On his bed were Reki's presents.

Langa felt himself wobbling, his knees weak, his hands shaking because oh, oh, oh, the presents all arranged together, the nail polish bottles carefully tucked into the pocket of the warm sweatshirt, the headbands tied around bunches of colored pencils, and Langa could feel the tears pooling in his eyes, sliding down his face, and, oh. He had been so *stupid.* He had cherished that delicate flame of hope in his chest, guarding it from the world, and he had bought so many stupid, stupid things. His throat swelled up and he rocked, his chest tight as he thought of the presents lying forgotten in his closet, just like him, and a sob shook his whole body.

Langa sank to the floor. He was trying not to cry, he really was but he couldn't stop it anymore, the sobs just kept wracking his body, the tears pouring out and he tried to gasp for air because oh god, oh god. He pressed his face to the sleeves of the sweatshirt, rocking back and forth, tears streaming down his face, in his mouth, and oh, oh. He had been so stupid. Of course Reki wouldn't want Langa's stupid anxiety-ridden confession, the shaky lines on the confession letter, the clumsily tied bow around the gifts. He gasped for air that wouldn't come and pulled the collar of the sweatshirt over his mouth, trying to muffle the sobs, because *oh* he shouldn't cry because Reki was going to be so happy, he would be so happy with his box of chocolates and his lovely girlfriend, and Langa rocked back and forth, sobbing. He wanted Reki to be happy, he *did,* so why couldn't he stop crying?

He pressed the soft inside of the collar to his mouth and gasped against it, tears spilling out of his eyes, down his neck and into his wet hair, still damp and cold from the rain and Langa couldn't *breathe,* he was crying so hard. The fabric smelled like Reki. It smelled like Reki giving him a hug, pressing their chests together, his hands soothing in Langa's hair and Langa rocked back and forth, desperate, and *oh* he choked out another sob, *oh* Reki had kissed him softly on the mouth on the threshold of his house, he had kissed Langa goodbye.

Goodbye.

Langa kept his mouth pressed to the sweatshirt so he wouldn't sob too loudly, the tears streaming down his face. Something so beautiful wasn't made for someone for Langa, someone with cold clumsy hands and an awkward accent and a slow, slow brain. He gasped a breath and then buried his mouth in the sweatshirt again, hugging himself, the pain shuddering through his whole body.

He cried until his face was raw and his hands were shaking and he couldn't feel his feet, his cold cold feet on the cold floor. And then he rubbed his face, smearing the tears on his cheeks, and struggled for air. The sobs were still stuck in his chest, and he knew soon the tears would come again, but he managed to find his phone on the floor beside him, wiping his eyes as he turned it over. The screen lit up with messages from Reki.

hey langa please tell me you got home

hey

hey man i'm worried

please answer me okay?

i'm worried something bad happened to you

please langa

Langa sniffled, tears sliding down his wet face. Reki was so kind, so caring. Probably he felt hurt that Langa had ended things, because he didn't know about the wonderful thing that would happen to him tomorrow, but he was still worried about Langa. Clumsily Langa typed back,

I'm home.

His hands hovered over the screen. He typed *<3,* because they had always sent each other hearts, even before the kissing, but then something in his heart broke and he had to backspace, more tears welling in his eyes. No. The kissing had ruined something between them, something that would never be the same again.

ok, Reki sent back, and then,

thank you.

Langa choked back another sob. He wanted to type something else, he wanted Reki to know that Langa still loved him, that nothing had changed, except everything had changed. Langa's eyes blurred, and he stuffed the phone into the big, soft pocket of Reki's sweatshirt, *god* Reki's sweatshirt and clumsily he stumbled to his feet.

His eyes teared up again when he looked at the stupid pile of presents, and he rocked on his feet a little, pressing the sleeves to his eyes. He should have known better than to try to win Reki over with gifts. Reki was all feelings and muscles burning in the sun and chatter at a mile a minute. Langa gulped down another sob and toppled onto the bed, curling up into a ball.

He had just wanted to show Reki how much he liked him, the only way he knew how. Langa was so clumsy with words.

He swallowed, thinking about hiding the presents in the closet, thinking about Reki finding them one hot summer day and scratching his arm while he asked Langa what they were for. No. Langa swallowed, hard, pressing the sleeves to his eyes again. Maybe...maybe it would be alright if he gave Reki a couple of the gifts, just one or two. After all, Reki gave him gifts sometimes, at the mall, and at the carnival too, so maybe Langa could give them to him platonically. Not...not the clothes, or the plushies, or the photo, god, the beautiful photo of the two of them, and oh Langa's throat hurt when he tried to swallow again. He would have to bury the photo deep, deep down in his drawers. He couldn't...he couldn't bear to throw it out.

He picked up the little tube of eyeliner with shaky hands, his eyes blurring. Reki loved to express himself loudly, in so many ways, drawing tattoos on his lower arms, wearing the nail polish, tiny threads of color tied into his hair by his sisters. He had said he used to wear eyeliner, too, before his dad laughed at him, and Langa swallowed. Maybe he would like to wear it again.

Langa just wanted him to be happy.

He curled up on the bed, staring at the wall, holding the tube of eyeliner tightly in his fist. On the nightstand, his mother had put the sunflowers into a vase of water, and Langa closed his eyes, feeling the tears slide down onto his pillow.

The flowers would probably die before Reki ever got the chance to see them.

Langa's eyes ached, the next morning, when he waited outside Reki's house for him. The sun was so bright overhead, all the clouds washed away by the rain, and Langa's fist was clasped around the tiny eyeliner tube and one of his favorite nail polish colors, a pretty yellow like the sunflowers. The color would match the summer, bright and glowy on Reki's nails as he carried boxes into the back room of DopeSketch, and Langa's throat hurt, but he clung to a dull hope that Reki would like it.

Langa wasn't going to give it to him today. This day belonged to Yua, and the beautiful confession gifts she probably had for him. But maybe in the future, Langa would have a

chance to offer Reki gifts of his own, with some stuttered excuse, and maybe Reki would smile, a small smile just for him.

Langa swallowed, stuffing them in his pocket. Reki's door opened, and he came outside, both of his hands on his backpack straps, his head down. Langa's heart thumped. Reki's hair fluttered in the wind, and he grabbed his skateboard slowly, tucking it under his arm.

"Hey," he said, without looking at Langa.

Langa's mouth was dry. Had he ruined things between them already? "Hi," he said, awkwardly, and for a moment neither of them moved. Langa's heart was thudding slowly against his ribs. Maybe Reki didn't want to be friends anymore now that the kissing was over. Maybe he was hurt, because Langa didn't want to hold hands in crowded train seats and sleep in hotel beds with him anymore, even though Langa *did* want to, he did, and he tried to swallow.

This day belonged to Yua, so Langa swallowed again, shifting his weight, and tried, "Good...good morning."

Reki glanced up, then, rubbing at his cheek, and Langa's heart stuttered, because oh, *oh* his eyes were red, and oh had he been crying? No, no Reki wasn't supposed to cry on his confession day, he was supposed to be happy, but Reki's voice was rough and scratchy when he said, "Sorry, dude," and Langa's chest clenched.

He didn't *understand.*

"Are you okay?" he asked, and Reki gave an awkward sort of laugh, rubbing his elbow.

"Yeah," Reki said. "I just, I didn't sleep well, s'all. But it'll be okay. It's okay, right? We're cool. Right?"

Langa's heart thumped so painfully when Reki looked at him, his hair fluttering in the soft, warm wind, so different from the storm last night. "Yeah," Langa managed, and he wanted to say that after school they could nap together, because Reki had always seemed to sleep more easily when he was snuggled up with Langa, but of course they couldn't do that anymore. "You're not mad at me?" he asked, because he couldn't help it, because Reki's eyes were so red and he was bouncing his leg on his skateboard.

Reki gave him a small smile, and he tugged a little on the sleeve of Langa's shirt. Langa's mouth was so, so dry, and he tried not to think of the early morning before their carnival date, when he had hugged Reki and buried his face in his shoulder and thought, *precious* .

"Langa, man," said Reki, and his voice was scratchy but still affectionate. "I could never be mad at you."

Langa swallowed. "Okay," he said. Reki was so kind, too kind. "I'm sorry for not texting last night."

"It's cool," said Reki. He scrambled up onto his board, and after a moment Langa did, too, still feeling clumsy and stiff. "Let's ride, okay?"

Langa nodded. Then Reki turned to him, rocking back and forth, and held out his knuckles. It took Langa a moment to remember what to do, but then he made a fist and bumped it gently against Reki's knuckles, his throat aching. Ah. They could no longer hold hands, so they would begin to do this again, instead.

Reki pushed away from the sidewalk, and Langa followed him, stiffly. He had always loved to skate with Reki, following the way he leaned around corners, racing in between lamp posts and street signs together, and he tried to keep his balance as they wove through the streets toward school. They could still skate, he tried to tell himself, even if he had lost everything else. He had lost Reki's palm against his, he had lost Reki's head leaning on his shoulder in the train, he had lost Reki's gentle fingers blow-drying his hair in a warm bathroom, he had lost tender early morning moments and the sleepy scratch of Reki's voice, but he hadn't lost this.

And then they were at school, and Reki was hopping off his board, and all Langa could do was follow him inside, dread already beginning to thrum at his chest.

Chapter End Notes

ahh, the pain... I might up the chapter count to 19 for the epilogue, depending on the length of the next couple of chapters. as always, thank you thank you thank you for all your lovely comments! reading your thoughts always makes my heart warm <3 and please don't be too angry with me!!!

some of my favorite art from this week!
reki on langa's lap by sposca on tumblr
neck kisses by fedzz_z on instagram
nail polish boys by catiiao on instagram
more reki on langa's lap by cryptidmullet on tumblr
happy trio by raaindropps on tumblr
renga being silly by milyqua on tumblr

I wish I could link to literally everything because it's all so so beautiful! I keep a highlight of instagram stories on my profile if you would like to see more ^-^ thank for you for reading and for all your wonderful support!!! until next time~

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

tw: some mentions of blood (just scrapes, but if you would like to skip, here are the paragraphs to skim: "Langa heaved a breath, staring up at Reki's flushed, sweaty face" / "He rolled off of Langa, tumbling onto his back" and the paragraph after that / "“I want,” said Langa quickly, and god" / "And, oh. Langa's cheeks heated up")

also, a bit of a spoilery tw: this chapter contains some bullying (stop reading at "Reki, surrounded by girls" and ctrl+f to "“Langa,” Reki was saying, his voice all scratchy and fucked up, “Langa, Langa.”") Please be safe! And I hope you enjoy the chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day was a slow, warm hum of dread.

Langa could feel a sob stuck in his raw throat as he sat, hands in his lap, in the sunny classroom, no matter how many times he tried to swallow it down. He couldn't pay attention to the lessons; the teacher's mumbling sounded like gibberish to his blurry brain, and he tried not to stare at Yua, but his eyes kept dragging across the desks to where she was sitting. Yua looked beautiful, because of course she did, her soft brown hair fluttering in the lazy summer air, hiding her shy smiles behind her handwritten notes. She kept leaning over the aisle to whisper to Nanami, and then Nanami turned around and stared openly at Langa and Reki, and Langa could feel his throat tight and aching, sweat rolling down his neck and into the collar of his shirt.

His limbs were wound so tightly, from the fear and the dread, and his feet were numb under the seat, his stiff hands pressed between his thighs. Across the aisle, Reki was slumped over, cheek in his hand, staring drearily out the window. Langa's throat hurt, because he wanted to say something to comfort him, but he couldn't come up with anything. He wrote a clumsy note on a scrap of paper, his left hand shaking over the words *you okay, Reki?,* but it looked stupid, so Langa crumpled the paper up and tried to swallow through his tight, tight throat.

He just wanted Reki to be happy.

Together they trudged through the crowded hallways up to the roof for lunch. Langa's hands ached as he unpacked his bento box, and Reki slouched against the wall next to him, sticking his feet out in front of him. "Are you okay?" Langa asked, awkwardly, and Reki rubbed his nose and squinted against the bright, bright sun.

"Yeah," he said, but his voice sounded raspy and unused. "M'good. Just thinking."

Langa clamped his mouth shut again, silently putting some of his food into Reki's lunch box, so they could share the way they always did. The dread was thrumming in his veins again, because any moment, Yua could appear on the roof and ask to take Reki away, and Langa would have to sit here, useless, staring into his empty bento box with his aching throat. He tried to eat, even though his hands were trembling on the chopsticks. Maybe this would be the last time he and Reki ate lunch together alone, their elbows bumping, rolling a skateboard between their feet, their heads leaning together against the smooth concrete wall, sharing secret smiles. Their last lunch, and Reki was slumped over, his legs spread haphazardly around his skateboard, too dejected to talk.

Langa's eyes felt sort of achy and hot when he thought about Reki being sad during his first confession. He knew he should say something, but he just balled up his napkins and stared at his feet. The day was so beautiful and sunny and perfect, and Langa's head was too fuzzy and swollen to cheer Reki up, and his eyes burned. He should bolster Reki's confidence before the confession, he should tell Reki that he would be a wonderful boyfriend, the best, that any girl would be so, so lucky to hold his hand, but the words got stuck in Langa's throat along with the sob.

He wasn't a good friend after all.

Slowly they returned to class. Underneath the desk, Langa clutched at the eyeliner tube in his pocket, trying not to stare at the clock with increasing desperation, his eyes stinging as the seconds ticked down and down, the day drawing to an end. He tried so hard to focus on the fact that Reki would be happy, Reki would be so happy and excited and full of things to tell Langa, re-enacting the whole confession in his bedroom, waving his hands around while Langa pressed his fingers tightly between his thighs, trying to nod along, trying not to cry. Reki would be smiling, so big, when he came out from behind the school with his fingers laced with Yua's, he would be smiling so happily when he found Langa by the school gates, and somehow, somehow Langa would choke his way through a *congratulations* and then, and then…

Langa's chest ached, and his numb hands fumbled on the eyeliner tube, nearly dropping it.

He didn't know what would happen then.

Maybe the day would never end, he thought, trying and failing not to glance at the clock again, maybe they could stay lingering in this warm, sunny classroom for eternity, forever dreading the end of the day. But Langa's throat grew tighter and tighter as sweat rolled down his neck, until finally the teacher called them to silence, saying, "You can begin packing up," and Langa tried to swallow and he couldn't and, and, oh.

The end had come.

He glanced over at Reki, a desperate sort of feeling rising up in his throat, like *please don't leave me,* and Reki turned his head and smushed his cheek against his palm again, gazing at Langa. His slouchy posture was worse than ever, and Langa's throat hurt looking at him, so much, because he had cried all night last night and it hadn't been enough, he needed to cry again, and Reki looked so unhappy, his mouth twisted to the side. Langa didn't want him to be unhappy. He wanted to cry, because it wasn't fair, that both of them had to be unhappy.

Painfully Langa tried to clear his throat. Their classmates were standing up, all around them, gathering their things and calling out to each other across the room. "Reki," Langa tried to say, and for a moment Reki didn't move, and Langa's heart throbbed, at how sad he looked. But then Reki heaved a sigh and lifted his head, just a little.

"Langa," he said, and Langa's heart throbbed again, because it hurt, the careful way Reki said his name, the way it always made Langa's chest warm and a bit achy. And then Reki reached his foot across the aisle, kicking at Langa's ankle, and Langa jumped, his heart pressing against his lungs.

"What?"

Reki sighed again, rubbing his mouth with his wrist. "I have to talk to you," he said, and Langa's chest twisted painfully at the tightness in Reki's voice, the strain. Oh god. Had he done something wrong? "Maybe we could go to the skate park? And…"

He trailed off, glancing up at the aisle, someone pausing in front of their desks, and Langa's heart thumped, with pain and dread, because he knew.

He knew it was Yua even before he looked up.

And, oh, she looked so pretty, pressing her hands to the front of her uniform skirt, trying to smother a nervous smile. "Reki," she said, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet, her round cheeks pink, and then she gave Langa a quick, shy smile, and the lump rose higher in Langa's throat, so he could barely breathe. "Reki, can I...can I talk to you."

Langa tried to swallow. But he couldn't.

"Ah—yeah," said Reki, running his hand through his hair, pulling it off his face, giving Yua a clumsy smile, and Langa's palms ached, even as he pressed them underneath his thighs. Reki was hurting, and he had wanted to talk to Langa about it, but maybe now he never would, because now Reki was scrambling clumsily out of his desk. He nearly tripped when one of his feet caught in the chair leg, grabbing at his backpack. "Lemme just—can Langa come?"

Langa's breath stuck in his throat, because oh, god. Reki had no idea. Yua glanced at Langa, laughing nervously, and Langa's face burned, and his eyes burned, because *oh* he would go anywhere with Reki but not—not for this. He couldn't bear to be there for this. He would start crying for sure.

"Well," said Yua. "I...I guess if he wants to? But I sort of wanted…"

She trailed off, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, and Reki glanced at Langa, and Langa's chest hurt, so badly. He tried to clear his throat again, because of course, of course Yua was too sweet to say she wanted Reki alone. It was hard to speak, but Langa managed to say, "You guys can go ahead, I'll, uh, I'll wait by the gate."

Reki looked at him, and Langa stared down at the desk, the lump swelling in his throat, because *god,* god why was Reki looking at him, he was trying so hard not to break down, and

he knew his cheeks must be flushed, his eyes trained desperately on a pencil doodle Reki had drawn on his desk two weeks ago. “Okay,” said Reki, finally, and then he cleared his throat, and Langa blinked, hard, his eyes burning, as Reki followed Yua down the aisle, through the patches of sun and then he was lost, among the jumble of their classmates, he was gone.

He was gone.

Langa kept staring at nothing, his eyes blurring at the edges, his throat so tight because god, god. He should be happy. He should be happy for Reki, sweet chaotic Reki with his shaky hands and his ripped-up hoodies, lovable Reki who had waited so long for somebody to love him, insecure over his lack of confessions and his chipped nail polish and his clumsy kissing. Langa wanted so badly for Reki to be happy, he had taught Reki to kiss just so Reki would be happy, so why was his throat so raw, why was he struggling so much not to cry?

He was a horrible person. Langa squeezed his eyes shut and breathed in a shaky, tight breath.

In the darkness he tried not to remember the way Reki had pressed their mouths together feverishly in the rain, the way Langa had held his breath so he wouldn’t sob while they kissed. His throat ached, his chest ached, his whole body ached. Reki’s hand had felt so good pressed to the small of Langa’s back, holding him close in the bed, kissing his forehead, *god.* Langa squeezed his trembling hands between his thighs, trying to breathe, god he needed to breathe or he was going to cry, and, and he needed to think about something else, something other than the softness in Reki’s eyes when he cupped Langa’s face between his palms, and god, *god.* His throat hurt so much. It was so hard to breathe.

Langa sucked in a ragged breath, and then he forced himself to his feet, stumbling a little in the aisle. He wasn’t going to cry right here in the classroom, he was—he was going to go outside in the sunshine and he was going to wait for Reki, he was going to be a good friend, he was going to smile and fist-bump Reki and congratulate him on his first confession. He wasn’t going to think about Reki sitting in his lap, his thighs warm on either side of Langa’s body, his face rosy with happiness, he *wasn’t* , and oh, Langa’s eyesight was blurring again, and he had to swallow, hard, fumbling for his things. It would be *okay,* he told himself, it would be, he would still feel the warm bump of Reki’s knuckles against his own, he would still be allowed to walk home with them, he would still—

Except.

Except — Langa paused, his heart hammering in his throat, staring down into his backpack.

What if—what if Reki had wanted to tell him they couldn't be friends anymore?

Langa swallowed, and god, no, his eyes were already burning, his throat choking up, because *no,* Reki wouldn't bring him to the skatepark to say that, the skatepark was their spot, but Langa's legs were already wobbling dangerously and his throat hurt *so badly.* Reki had seemed so upset all day. He had barely talked to Langa, he hadn't smiled at him, and Langa had to swallow and then swallow again because what if this was the end? What if he couldn't even hang out with Reki anymore? And, *oh,* he loved being Reki's friend so much, he loved their long lazy DopeSketch shifts so much, and exploring new places to skate together, and sharing warm cans of soda together. He wanted them to keep hanging out, he wanted to keep hearing Reki's laugh, he wanted to lie on his back on Reki's soft, sagging mattress and he wanted to listen to all of Reki's thoughts, god, who would he be without Reki's rambling trains of thought?

Langa's hands were trembling, and he wobbled a little, on his numb feet. Maybe he had been a bad friend.

He rubbed his mouth shakily. Maybe Reki was upset that Langa never understood him, he hadn't understood why Reki's were so red this morning, he hadn't understood why Reki's voice was so scratchy and rough. He wobbled again, pulling on his backpack, and god, he wanted to go home and wrap himself up in Reki's warm sweatshirt again and cry. He knew soon Reki would ask for the sweatshirt back, and Langa would have to give it up, maybe he would even have to give back the carnival gifts Reki had gotten him. It would hurt, because Langa had already begun hugging the little plushie every time he slept, dreaming about the happy, happy day they had spent clinging to each other's hands, but he would give it back, if Reki asked.

His throat hurt. His feet hurt, as he stumbled for the door, catching his hand on the wall a little as he made it into the hallway, the faces of his classmates blurring together, his eyes stinging, hot.

It would be okay, he tried to tell himself, it would be okay, it would be okay, probably Reki wasn't angry, probably Reki wasn't leaving him, but it was hard to convince himself when

his throat was swollen up so tight, his hands trembling on his locker door. He barely managed to get all his things into his backpack, his skateboard tucked under his arm, he managed to get down the hallway again, but it would be okay, it would be *okay,* he would just — he would just make it to the front gates and wait for Reki and —

and Langa stumbled out into the courtyard and saw him.

Reki.

Reki, surrounded by girls.

Langa wavered on his feet, his heart in his throat, clinging to the door frame because oh god, oh god, Reki's hair was so bright and vibrant against the blue sky and he was surrounded, all of Yua's friends were there, the heart box abandoned by her feet and Langa could feel the world spinning, a rush of colors and sounds and they were all talking at once and he heard Reki's voice rise up, saying loudly,

"I'm sorry, I—"

and then one of the girls stepped forward, her hair flying around her face, and shoved him.

Reki stumbled back, and Langa flinched, because oh *god* they were hurting Reki, they were hurting Reki, and he needed to run, he needed to run to Reki, but his feet were stuck to the ground and everything was blurring, his panic thrumming frantically in his hands, his eyes, his chest because the girl was saying something now, her mouth red with lipstick and oh, oh it was the girl from the mixer, Nanami, the girl with all of the terrible things to say about Reki and Reki was rubbing his face with his hand and Nanami said loudly,

"Who the *hell* do you think you are?"

and oh, oh god, Langa couldn't breathe, he could barely see Reki holding up his hands, saying, "I—" before Nanami was yelling,

“No, shut up, okay, god, shut up! You don’t deserve her! You don’t deserve to *talk* to her!”

They were hurting Reki, they were hurting him and oh god, oh god, Langa couldn’t breathe, his heart was pounding in his throat and he couldn’t move, he was frozen, and his eyes were stinging because he couldn’t *see,* he couldn’t see and he needed — he needed to get to Reki, and god why wouldn’t his feet move, god oh god and Reki was scrubbing at his cheek with his sleeve, dragging his hair back, his eyes red, and then Langa was stumbling down the steps as Yua cried,

“Stop, Nanami!”

And her hair was flying around her, one of her friends hugging her, and the ground rocked under Langa’s feet as the world spun and Nanami snapped,

“You should be grateful, Reki, that somebody thought to confess to you, don’t you get it, none of us like you, nobody likes you—”

And oh, oh god, Reki stumbled back another step and the world blurred in Langa’s stinging eyes and he was hurrying as fast as he could across the courtyard, his heart pounding, burning in his chest, and then Nanami spat,

“You fucking loser,”

And Langa’s hand caught on Reki’s shoulder just as he stumbled between them.

And then

And then oh god. Oh god. They were all staring at him, all the girls, their eyes wide, and Langa couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t feel himself breathing, he couldn’t hear anything at all,

the world was spinning around him in a blur of nothing and all he could feel was the pin of a dozen stares and the hot tight fury in his chest and he knew —

he knew he was shaking

— he knew but he couldn't feel it. "Stop," he said, loud, so loud in his thundering ears, and he could *hear* his accent, his horrible accent but he couldn't stop, the world was burning in a bright rush of white around him and his ears were ringing and he managed to bite out, "You can't — you can't — you can't talk to him like that."

Nanami's mouth was so red. Langa could barely see her face. He could barely see anything at all, and he didn't know if they were talking, if they were saying anything, it was only Langa alone in this white white space, the panic held at bay somehow, away from his body as his mouth stumbled over the words, all these clumsy angry words bottled up for so long, god the words he should have said a long time ago —

"Reki is perfect," and then, furious, "You should — you need to leave him alone," and then, "Go away, and then, chest heaving, "Get the *fuck* away from him."

They *couldn't* hurt Reki.

Her mouth moved. She was saying something, but Langa couldn't hear it, and he didn't care, he didn't care, his body was beginning to burn again, first in his chest and then in his throat and then in his hands, and then the feeling was rushing back because *oh,* oh Reki had grabbed onto his arm, Reki was tugging him back, and Langa stumbled against him, his feet clumsily and stiff in the whiteness and for a moment

he thought he would fall

but then Reki's hand caught his back, steadying him, and he was saying something, and Langa could hear his voice, and he couldn't understand the words but it didn't matter, it was *Reki,* and oh god they had hurt Reki but Langa wouldn't let them hurt him again, he wouldn't, and oh god he could feel his hands clutched in hot fists, his palms burning, and then the girls were shrinking away, and Nanami turned around, and Reki was still talking, his

voice incessant, and the color began to bleed into the world again when his voice came through the white noise.

“Langa,” Reki was saying, his voice all scratchy and fucked up, “Langa, Langa.”

“It’s okay,” Langa said, the world blurring, his hand tight on Reki’s arm even though his legs were wobbling, and then Yua hurried to them, her long hair flying, and her hand caught on Langa’s elbow, warm, and Langa nearly fell over because his heart was pounding and his brain was screeching, and then Yua was holding onto Reki’s arm too, and she was saying,

“Sorry, sorry, oh, oh I’m so sorry,”

and Langa could see the red rough flush of Reki’s face, the pinch of his eyes, and oh god they had hurt him, why had they hurt him, and then Reki was scrubbing his mouth with sleeve and his voice was so *raw* when he got out, “No, *I’m* sorry,” and she said,

“No, no, no,”

and the way she looked at Langa was pleading, and Langa tried to swallow, he tried and he tried because everything was so fuzzy in his ears, the colors so bright around them and he didn’t know what was happening but it felt big, it felt like the ground was shifting underneath his feet and then Yua squeezed his arm with her warm, soft hand and then she broke away, running off toward her friends, stumbling a bit as she bent down to collect the heart shaped box from the ground and oh.

Oh.

The box.

The confession.

Langa's throat burned. Something had happened. Something big had happened, but his mind was blurry, his mind was scattered in many many places and there were so many colors and sounds and he could only stare at the long trailing bow in Yua's hair against the blue, blue sky, and then Reki's hand squeezed his elbow and Langa's breath stuttered. Reki — Reki's warm arm pressed against his and oh, Reki's breathing was fast and ragged and everything came crashing back down.

And then Langa had turned around, so fast his ankle nearly twisted, his hands hovering around Reki's arms, and oh god, oh god, Reki's cheeks were a bright burn of red and his forehead was all creased up and he was shifting his weight, his hands shaking, like he was trying to hide the humiliation, and oh, oh, oh they had hurt him, they had hurt him and Langa's whole body burned. He wanted to wrap his arms around Reki and hold him, he wanted to protect him *god* he wanted to protect him, but Reki's breathing was tight and irregular and Langa remembered — *don't touch at first, Reki needs space* — so instead he managed to gasp out, "Reki,"

and Reki sucked in a harsh breath and said, "Let's skate,"

and his voice was so raw and shaky and vulnerable and Langa could feel his heart shattering because *they shouldn't have hurt him,* but he nodded, he nodded and he stumbled back, and Reki threw his skateboard down onto the ground, clambering onto it, and Langa scrambled onto his own board, and then Reki grabbed at Langa's fingers, just before he kicked off and sent them careening down the courtyard.

Langa could barely breathe, he could only hold on for dear life as their boards rocketed over the loose cobblestones, past the girls, past the scattered groups in the courtyard and the trees and sky blurred around them, a bright myriad of colors brighter than Langa had ever seen them before and his throat burned, his legs burned and his chest burned because his hand was in Reki's.

Reki was holding his hand.

The world shook under his feet as they bounced over the curb, onto the street, and Reki swung him around a wide, wide curve as they skidded onto a side street, and Langa nearly lost his balance because he couldn't breathe, he could only hold down and speed down the street behind Reki, past all the sidewalks where they had scraped their elbows bloody, the parking lots where the had sprawled on their backs to catch their breath, the front of

Shadow's flowershop where they had breathed in golden hour, the colorful vending machines and the convenience store and DopeSketch and all the places where they had been together, Langa and Reki, Reki and Langa, together.

Everything was so fast, a blur, a blur of color and sound and hot hot sun and Reki's hair whipping around in front of him, and Langa was only *speed* and *wind* and *Reki,* all of his energy focused on the furious rumble of the board beneath his feet and the hot air in his throat and Reki's warm, sweaty hand clutched in his, because Reki was *holding his hand.*

They were speeding toward the skatepark before Langa could process the sharp turns, his body wavering wildly on the board as Reki jumped over a bench, his feet pounding on the wood before he leapt back onto his board, and then Langa saw people, the shapes of them, their colored shirts all over the skatepark, and oh they were children, mostly children, and Langa skidded to a stop so he wouldn't run anybody over, but Reki didn't stop. His hand tore from Langa as he rocketed across the park, flying up the halfpipe, twisting in midair, a perfect flip and Langa's heart caught in his throat at the sight of his body against the sky, his hair caught against the sunlight like fire, *Reki,* and in his ringing ears Langa heard one of the kids cheering.

Reki hit the ground hard, on his feet, and then he was flying toward Langa, his knees bent as a group of boys yelled, waving their hands excitedly, and Langa's heart pounded because he needed to stumble back, to get out of the way because Reki was coming so fast, he wasn't going to stop in time, but Langa's brain wouldn't move and, and, and—

Reki crashed into him and they both went flying backward.

Langa's back hit the ground hard, his head thumping against Reki's hand, Reki's body landing on top of him, and Langa hissed in pain as his back scraped along the concrete but *oh,* oh Reki had caught his head, Reki had put his hand on the back of Langa's head so it wouldn't hit the ground, and Langa could feel Reki heaving for air above him, his body hot and sweaty and shaking with the emotion, all the pent up emotion, his breathing uneven, their chests pressed together, so alive and real and ragged.

Langa could feel the sweat dripping from Reki's face onto his neck, he could feel the painful fumble of Reki's shoes against his ankles and he gasped for breath, because *oh* he could feel the hot air in his lungs, gritty and rough. He could *breathe,* he could breathe and his heart was still pounding, in his chest, and he squinted open his eyes, the sun burning his face. Reki

groaned, lifting himself up on his elbows, his hair hanging down, his headband askew, his eyes raw and his mouth parted, and *oh* his lips were harsh and red where he had bitten them, tearing the skin.

Langa heaved a breath, staring up at Reki's flushed, sweaty face, feeling Reki's pounding heartbeat against his own, and Reki rubbed at his mouth, smearing the blood on his sleeve. "Ah," Reki managed, looking down at Langa, into his eyes, "sorry, crap, sorry, I thought, I thought I could stop in time—"

"It's okay," Langa said, voice cracking, because he should have scrambled out of the way but he hadn't, he hadn't because he wanted the chaotic whirlwind of Reki crashing into him, he wanted all of it, and the world was so bright and hot and *real* around them and his heart was thundering against his ribs. Reki's chest was still heaving against him, and with everything shaky exhale he was saying,

"Sorry, sorry, sorry,"

and Langa grabbed at his shoulder, his warm, warm shoulder, the pads of his fingers pressing into the damp fabric of Reki's uniform, and he could feel the moment Reki's apologies died in his throat.

For a moment they just stared at each other, panting in the same hot, hot air, and Reki's face was so flushed and sweaty and sunburnt, his eyes fire-gold and red-rimmed, and he was breathing heavily through his cracked, bleeding mouth. Langa swallowed once, and then he managed to say, through his dry, dry throat,

"It's okay, Reki, you're good,"

and Reki's shoulders slumped, his chest deflating in a sigh of relief.

He rolled off of Langa, tumbling onto his back on the hot concrete next to him, and stuck his hand up into the air, the hand he had caught Langa with. The sun shone bright between his stubby bandaged fingers, and Langa winced, in sympathetic pain, because Reki's knuckles were scratched and bloodied, the skin shredded from the fall. "I'm sorry," Langa heard

himself say, but Reki gave a scratchy, breathless laugh and dropped the hand, punching Langa's shoulder with a loose, clumsy fist.

Langa winced again, because the blood was probably on his shirt, now, too, but then Reki was saying, "It's okay," and the worry burned away. Langa turned his head, with some difficulty, to look at Reki, to make sure he was okay, and oh, oh he was really close, his nose only a few inches away on the hot asphalt, and Langa swallowed, his mouth still hot and dry from the furious race over. Reki made a face at him, his cheeks puffing up, and then his hand was fumbling with Langa's wrist, and Langa's heart pounded, again, because *oh* Reki's rough scraped up fingers, touching his skin, and then before he could think Langa was turning his hand over, palm up, fingers grabbing at Reki's, and Reki shoved his own palm against it, their fingers curling together, and oh.

Reki was holding his hand.

Langa sucked in a breath, his heart beating in his cheeks, in his palms, in his throat, because oh, the ground was hot and gravelly underneath them and the sun was hot and bright above them and Reki's chest was rising and falling next to him, their hands hot and tight against each other, like the only real thing in the world.

"They were cheering for you," Langa managed, because it was important, the most important thing, Reki spinning in the air, people cheering for him, as they should, because he was wonderful, he was brilliant, *oh* he was incredible. Reki laughed, and Langa's heart thumped, because oh, oh Reki's laugh, Reki's scratchy laugh, the way he rubbed at his mouth afterward, Langa could feel his heart beating in his hot hot cheeks.

"Aw," said Reki, and his voice was still raw, a bit strained from earlier, "they're just kids, they'll cheer for anything."

Langa swallowed. His mouth was still dry, but when he squeezed Reki's hand, Reki squeezed back, their eyes hanging onto each other, and Langa never wanted to look away, god, he wanted to look into Reki's eyes forever. He swallowed again, because his throat was hot and burning and he had thought they couldn't hold hands anymore, last night in the cold and the rain he had thought things were ending.

And then he remembered the heart box lying on the ground and his heart stuttered.

Reki—

Had Reki rejected her?

Langa couldn't breathe for a minute, staring at him, his heart pounding against the palm where he could feel Reki's torn-up skin. Reki blinked, his hair all over his face, his headband tugged low, and squeezed his hand again, and oh, oh. Reki must have rejected her. But why? Langa's throat burned, and he wanted to ask, he wanted to, but first he needed to make sure Reki was okay.

He sat up clumsily, keeping his fingers tight around Reki's, and after a moment Reki struggled to sit up, too, leaning heavily against his wrist. "Did I hurt you?" Reki asked, his voice still raspy, and Langa blinked, his eyes bleary against the sun.

"Maybe," he said, and Reki frowned, and hastily Langa added, "But it's fine, it's—it's nothing worse than usual. Are you—are you okay?"

Reki glanced down at their joined hands, and Langa swallowed, his heart thudding, because of course Reki was just checking his bleeding knuckles, of course, but then Reki glanced up again, his eyes lingering on Langa's, and when he said, "Yeah," it felt like the world was swimming.

Langa cleared his throat. "At...at school," he began, but Reki shook his head, his hair flying around his face.

"Forget it," he said, his voice cracking on the words, his cheeks harsh and red with the flush of embarrassment, and Langa's heart hurt, it hurt so much but he nodded. The kids were still skating around them, middle-school aged maybe, Miya's age, like bright flashes of color and Reki squeezed Langa's hand again, their palms pressing together. "School's—it's almost done anyway. And I don't care about them. Those girls." His eyes were fierce, his hair wild. "I only care about you."

And, oh. Langa's throat was tight and full, and his back stung under the thin fabric of his button-down, and he barely managed to work out, "Oh—oh."

Reki swallowed hard, glancing down at their hands again. Somewhere a kid whooped loudly, jumping over a bench, and Reki said, "I mean—I mean Yua too. I mean we're still—friends. I just mean, those other girls, I don't, I don't care about any of them. And you—I mean."

He rubbed at his face, at the peeling skin on his nose, and Langa watched with his heart in his throat, and then Reki dropped his hand and muttered,

"I mean, thank—thank you. For standing up for me. I mean it. I know that stuff's not easy for you."

The heat rose up around them, and Langa could taste the dirt and grime in his mouth when he cleared his throat, the dust blowing around the skatepark, and he could feel the gravel digging into their joined palms as he squeezed Reki's hand, tight, and didn't let go. "I would do it again, for—for you," he managed. It was almost hard to speak. "I think I—I would do almost anything for you."

Reki's face reddened, and he rubbed his cheeks again, and Langa's heart thudded in his chest. "Almost anything?" Reki muttered, and, ah.

"Anything," Langa amended, and Reki ducked his head, embarrassed.

"Langa."

"Reki."

Reki squeezed his hand again, his cheeks still flushed, and Langa's heart was slowing down now, but he could still feel it beating in his cheeks, and oh, he was probably flushed, too. Could Reki tell? Would he be upset with Langa, for telling those girls *Reki is perfect,* and oh, he almost winced, because that was embarrassing, wasn't it? Well. Well, it would be more

embarrassing if it wasn't true, and Reki was right, school was nearly out, and then it would just be the summer and they would have each other, and —

They would have each other.

Langa swallowed, his heart thumping so hard it hurt.

"If you'd do anything for me," Reki muttered, looking down at their hands again, his ears red, "you should—" and Langa's heart thumped again wildly because oh— and then Reki said, "buy me a soda," and oh, oh.

Langa swallowed, forcing his heart back down into an appropriate place, and managed to say, "Okay."

Reki glanced up, still flushed. "Really?"

Langa nodded, because Reki had bought him vending machine food so many times, whenever he knew that Langa was hungry and didn't want to admit it, whenever he heard Langa's stomach growling and laughed about it, teasing him endlessly, until Langa's face was pink, and Langa squeezed his hand, hard. Reki deserved it. He deserved so much. Especially after hearing those horrible, horrible things.

Those girls—they had no right.

But Langa couldn't stop them from saying awful things. He couldn't stop anyone from hurting Reki, not really, he could only be here to bandage the pain afterward, but god, it was a job he wanted to protect fiercely, with his life.

He scrambled to his feet, tugging on Reki's hand, and Reki followed him, one of the band-aids popping off his knee as he stood, still hanging onto Langa's hand, and Langa sucked in a breath, looking at the way their thumbs rubbed against each other. Reki's nail polish was chipped in the same places as his own, and maybe, maybe Reki could paint Langa's nail

again, with his tongue poking out in concentration, and oh, how had Langa ever imagined losing Reki? He swallowed again, squeezing Reki's hand, and Reki squeezed back, tightly, and for a moment they both stood there, the heat rising from the hot concrete to their cheeks, flushed and clinging to each other, and then Reki cleared his throat.

Langa looked up hastily, his neck flushing. Oh. Oh, he had been caught staring, but Reki was looking at their hands, too, swinging them just a little between their bodies. "C'mon?" he said, and Langa swallowed and nodded and let Reki tug him across the colorful concrete, toward the shade and the vending machines. His heart was still pounding in his throat, a little. They were holding hands, but they weren't practicing anymore, there was no more practicing, and Langa didn't know what was happening, only that he never wanted it to end, he didn't want to let go of Reki's hand, and Reki was clinging to his fingers tightly like he didn't want to let go, either.

The air was cooler under the overhang by the bathrooms, and Reki kicked at the front of the vending machine as he punched in the number for the soda he wanted. Langa fumbled with his money, feeding it into the machine, waiting until the soda dropped down. Reki grabbed it, but then he started punching in different numbers, and Langa frowned, confused.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He could feel the sweat trickling down his sides, even in the shade, and he could see the warm flush on Reki's cheeks as he started feeding his own cash into the vending machine.

"I know you're hungry," said Reki, sounding defensive, his face red, and oh, oh. Langa swallowed, his own face flushing too, because he saw the bag of chips drop to the bottom of the vending machine.

"You don't have to—" Langa managed, and god, his armpits were hot and sweaty with embarrassment, his palm warm against Reki's. "I mean, that—that defeats the purpose of me buying you something."

"No it doesn't," said Reki, kicking at the machine again as he grabbed the chips, pushing them into Langa's hand and then scrubbing at his red, red cheeks with his wrist. "The purpose is for us to buy each other stuff." He cleared his throat, scuffing his foot hard against the concrete and then glanced up, his face flushed, his eyes just the tiniest bit unsure, like he was trying to hide it. "Or do you not want—do you not want—"

“I want,” said Langa quickly, and god, god he was so sweaty and warm and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from Reki, at the way Reki gulped, clutching the soda in one hand and Langa’s palm in the other. His skin was so rough and textured and *real* underneath Langa’s buzzing fingertips, and it felt impossible, because just this morning he had felt sick and tired, knowing Reki would accept Yua’s confession, knowing Reki would leave him, and now here they were, the bottoms of their shoes baking in the heat, clinging to each other. Reki squeezed his palm again, and Langa’s heart thudded in his chest, because it felt too good to be true, but it *was* true, Reki’s palm was damp with sweat and blood as he gripped Langa’s fingers, impossible to ignore.

Maybe none of those fragile, frightening dreams of Reki abandoning him had been real, after all.

Langa took a breath. The colors around them were bright, so bright, green and yellow leaves hanging down from the concrete overhang, sunlight filtering through the shade onto Reki’s sunburnt face, the soda can red and slippery with condensation. Langa took another breath, squeezing Reki’s hand, and for the first time he hesitantly allowed himself to believe that maybe the fears were all in his head, the way his doctor in Canada had once said.

“You wanna go sit up on the halfpipe?” Reki asked, pointing with the hand holding Langa’s, and Langa rubbed his sweaty hands on his pants, nodding. They walked back out into the hot sunshine, dodging around the middle-school kids racing by in roller skates, and grabbed their boards and backpacks from the concrete. When they scrambled up the half-pipe, Langa’s shoes squeaked loudly against the rubber, and Reki collapsed beside him, tugging at the buttons of his uniform shirt.

Together they peeled off their button-downs, catching their breath in their sweaty undershirts, and when Reki leaned against him, Langa could feel how warm he was through the thin, damp fabric, and he leaned against Reki, too. Their hands found each other against the hot edge of the half-pipe, and Langa tangled their fingers together, feeling Reki’s thumb press to his scabbed knuckles, and he let out a long, shuddery breath.

Reki always knew. He knew that the touch helped ground Langa, when he was afraid of the things in his head, the things saying everybody would leave him all alone. But Reki hadn’t left. And Langa still had his mom, and Manager Oka, and their friends at S, and below them, dozens and dozens of kids were skating around wildly, bumping into each other, safety helmets bright in the hot sun.

“Where did all the people come from?” asked Langa, a bit stupidly, because his brain was still stuck on the way Reki’s palm rubbed roughly against his own. Reki tucked his hair back, bouncing one of his heels against the ramp.

“The middle school let out this week,” he said. “Miya was telling me. So this place’ll be overrun all summer, probably.”

Langa nodded, because it made sense, for once something made sense, and he let his legs swing a little, too, beside Reki’s. All the motion and sound overwhelmed him, but not too badly, and after his long, cold night, Langa was almost glad for the buzz of overstimulation on his skin because at least he was feeling *something,* something other than an empty ache in his chest. The park was full of laughter, sounds of glee rising with the heat, and maybe sometime they could bring Reki’s sisters here, too, with Miya. Langa breathed out, again, and pressed his free hand into the gravelly top of the half-pipe, the tops of his legs baking in the sun, and he thought he couldn’t be alone, after all, in a place like this.

The storm had blown through, and Reki was still here, beside him.

One of the kids began to chase his friend, squirting a plastic water gun, and Langa inhaled the smell of sunscreen from one of the dads below, and clumsily Reki unscrewed his soda and took a big gulp. Langa opened his chips, the salt stinging his tongue, crumbling against his fingertips, and he tried to think of how to ask Reki about what happened, about the confession. He could feel the conversation lingering between them, and he was almost afraid to bring it up, because maybe Reki would pull his hand away, maybe this precious uncertain thing in the clasp of their hands would become too uncomfortable.

But Reki was still holding his hand, even though the practicing was over, and Langa needed to ask. He cleared his throat, awkwardly. “Did...did Yua confess to you?” he asked, and then, because he couldn’t keep it a secret any longer, he blurted out, “I mean, she told me she was going to.”

Reki glanced at him, squinting against the sun, his eyebrows crawling up underneath his sweaty hair. “She did?”

Langa nodded, his cheeks hot. “Last night.”

Reki stared at him for a moment, his mouth working slightly, repeating the words to himself. Then he squeezed Langa’s hand, and Langa could feel his heart picking up pace again, because the sun was so bright on Reki’s face, on his freckled shoulders, and then Reki said, “You should have told me. I mean, then I could have turned her down more...more gently.”

Langa tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry. “You...you turned her down?”

“Yeah,” said Reki, shifting, his knee bumping against Langa’s, the warm hair on his leg tickling Langa’s skin. “Of course I did. I don’t like her like that.”

And, oh, Langa could feel the warm buzz on his skin, the burn of Reki’s thumb rubbing over his knuckles again, and he tried to swallow again, because Reki said the words as if they were obvious, no room for misunderstanding. Langa’s heart began to pound in his fingertips again as Reki glanced up at the sky, one eye squinted shut, because Reki sounded so *sure,* and Langa had yearned, for so long, for Reki to be sure.

He tried to swallow. This didn’t mean that Reki liked *him,* it didn’t mean anything. Maybe Reki had changed his mind about wanting to date somebody, maybe he had another person in their class he still liked, or maybe he still needed some time to figure himself out. And maybe that was okay. Because Langa would still be his best friend, and he took a deep breath, a long breath of the hot summer air. He had been silly to think Reki would leave him alone. Of course Reki wouldn’t leave him; they had always had fun together, at the carnival and at the mall and in Langa’s mom’s photo, during all the exhausting afternoons of skating when they had scraped up their palms and collapsed in Reki’s bed to watch videos. They told each other everything, scratchy-voice stories about their fathers, about finding out they liked boys, about the deep insecurities they carried around in their hearts. They were best friends, and Reki leaned on Langa, sometimes, the same way Langa leaned on him, when they were tired or hurting and nobody else understood, and maybe they could continue leaning on each other, even if it was just as friends. Langa swallowed, squeezing Reki’s palm, and Reki squeezed back, and together they watched the kids skate around the park, howling with joy as the sun began to sink behind the tops of the trees.

For the first time in a long time, Langa was content. This was enough.

“Your hand’s still bleeding,” said Langa, softly, after a long while, the chip bag empty and crumpled beside him, his mouth still tingling from the salt, and Reki glanced down at their tangled fingers.

“Huh,” Reki said, like he’d forgotten, and he lifted their clasped palms, turning his hand to look at his knuckles. “You’re right.”

Langa swallowed. “Of course I’m right,” he said, and then added, “Dipshit,” and Reki kicked at his ankle.

“There’s band-aids in my bag,” Reki said, pointing with his foot, and Langa glanced at the pile of their backpacks beside him on the half-pipe. Clumsily he rummaged through Reki’s stuff, searching for the first-aid kit he always carried, and when he popped it open, he could see the colorful band-aids on top, the ones with butterflies on them. He swallowed, turning back to Reki.

“Butterflies?”

Reki huffed a laugh, rubbing his knee. “My sisters,” he said, and Langa shifted against the half-pipe, the heels of his sneakers squeaking against the rubber. The sun was setting in long, slanting lines across the park, and most of the kids were traipsing home, and in the late afternoon the air was quieter, more peaceful. Below them, a mom was calling to her children, waving them toward a minivan.

“I like them,” Langa said, because he didn’t want Reki to be embarrassed over something like butterfly band-aids, and Reki made a humming noise in his throat. Carefully, so carefully, Langa turned over their clasped hands. The skin on Reki’s knuckles was rubbed raw and bleeding, and even though the sight made Langa feel vaguely woozy, he swallowed down the feeling and set to work.

Reki’s fingers twitched open, the chipped nail polish on his stubby fingernails catching the light, and Langa rubbed his thumb in circles in the tender place between Reki’s thumb and forefinger, soothing. Reki didn’t hiss in pain when Langa applied the antiseptic, the way Langa would have, and Langa chewed on his bottom lip as he wrapped band-aids around each one of Reki’s fingers, taking extra care with his ring finger, where the cuts were the deepest. Then he plastered more band-aids over the back of his hand, a kaleidoscope of

brightly-colored butterflies, and he could feel Reki watching him, the weight of his gaze heavy, comforting and flustering all at once. Langa swallowed again, trying not to focus on the warm press of Reki's palm against his own, the rough edges of his calluses as Langa glanced up again.

His heart thumped. Reki's eyes were so beautiful in the sunset, the fiery shine fading into something soft and golden. Reki squeezed his hand.

"Thanks," he said, something shy in his voice, and he cleared his throat as he bumped his foot against Langa's ankle again. "Do you want me to...I mean, did you scrape your back when I crashed into you? I could put band-aids there if you wanted."

And, oh. Langa's cheeks heated up, and he rubbed his sweaty hands against his pants. His back stung, and from the way his undershirt stuck to the ragged skin, he knew there was probably at least a little blood. "Okay," he said, his face warm, glancing around the park. He was too embarrassed to take his shirt off in front of a lot of people, but the park had emptied out, leaving only Langa and Reki together, up in their favorite spot.

"Turn around?" asked Reki, rubbing his face, the tops of his cheeks burnt a bright red, and obediently Langa shifted on the half-pipe, turning sideways. He tugged up the back of his shirt, and Reki made a sympathetic hissing sound at the torn skin there, and Langa squeezed his hand, because he didn't want to let go, even now. And Reki squeezed back, using his teeth to rip open the band-aids one-handed, and Langa swallowed, trying not to blush at the way Reki thumbed at the soft place between his shoulder blades.

The antiseptic hurt, but Reki hummed soothingly through it, his fingers gentle against Langa's skin, and Langa let his shoulders slump, breathing out into the touch. He liked that they bandaged each other up, after they had each gone through a hard night and a hard day, and Reki's touch was soft, as if his hands were apologies, or maybe promises, promises to always care for Langa, in one way or another. The sky was a deep orange around them, cicadas singing, and Langa could feel sweat rolling down his leg and dripping onto the hot top of the halfpipe as he closed his eyes, breathing out slowly.

After a while, Reki patted Langa's shoulder with his warm, warm palm and said, softly, "You're good, man," and Langa exhaled, feeling his body relax even more as he turned around. He opened his eyes, breathing in the sweat and the rubber and the asphalt, and Reki's

hair fluttered gently in the breeze. He picked up his soda and offered it to Langa, condensation sliding down the side. “Thirsty?”

Langa nodded, because he liked when they shared things, even small things like Reki’s favorite soda, and he tugged his shirt down carefully. When he took the soda, their hands bumped together, and Langa’s face warmed when he put his mouth on the rim of the bottle, where Reki’s mouth had touched. The soda was sticky and sweet, and Langa could taste Reki on his tongue even when he handed the soda back, and oh, he was so warm, their knees pressing together again, bone against bone.

“Do you think,” Langa asked, and then his cheeks flushed warmer, because he was so awkward, but he pushed forward anyway. “Do you think that Yua is okay? I mean, her friends are kind of...mean.”

Reki stuck the soda bottle between his thighs, screwing the cap on clumsily, one-handed. “I know,” he said, and sighed a little, his hair fluttering again. “I’m going to talk to her tomorrow. I wanna still be friends with her, y’know? Man, I never thought...I never thought getting a confession could be, like, a bad thing.”

Langa’s throat ached, a little, but when he squeezed Reki’s hand, Reki squeezed back almost immediately, so they were both clinging tightly to each other. Langa had to clear his throat before he could speak. “I’m sorry.”

“S’okay,” said Reki. He raised his head and made a face at the trees, at the setting sun. Langa knew how much Reki loved the sun, and it felt special, somehow, to see that love in the lines of his body, the way he stretched his feet out toward the deep orange of the sky. Then Reki said, “I’m okay,” and leaned close to Langa again, pressing their arms together.

Langa’s breath stuck in his throat, at the way Reki’s thigh brushed against his. He could feel Reki’s chest rise and fall, the tickle of his sleeve against Langa’s bare skin, and it all felt so special, precious, as if Langa should be holding his breath. “Are you…” He cleared his throat again, his cheeks warm. “Are you...are you upset?”

He knew the hurt wouldn’t go away overnight, the humiliation of that girl shoving Reki in the courtyard; probably it would be a memory Reki would relive every night for a long time.

Reki glanced at him, rubbing his thumb over Langa's knuckles again before saying, not entirely convincingly, "Not—not really."

Langa watched his face, the way his nose wrinkled at a passing bug, the way his sweaty hair fluttered limply in the soft summer air. The heat had faded somewhat, but Reki was still very, very warm, in all the places his body pressed against Langa's. Langa gripped his hand again, his throat a bit dry at the way Reki's eyelashes moved when he blinked, and said hesitantly, "If you want...can I...can I tell you the things you like to hear when you're upset?"

Reki's cheeks reddened, and he rubbed at his mouth, and Langa's chest squeezed, because oh, Reki was so pretty when he was embarrassed. "I—shit," Reki said, glancing away, and then quickly back at Langa's face, the blush rising, and Langa's heart squeezed again, his own face warming. "I don't mind," said Reki, and then more quietly, his voice rasping over the curse, "Fuck."

Langa's heart thumped in his chest, and he rubbed his thumb hard over Reki's bandaged knuckles, trying to swallow. The orange heat of the sun set the edges of Reki's hair on fire, and his face was burnt so red, so raw and vulnerable. He was precious, oh, he was so precious and Langa needed to be so gentle, and carefully he cradled Reki's injured hand in his own as he said, "I like everything about you."

Reki's head snapped up, his cheeks flaming, his eyes scrunched up in embarrassment. "Don't — don't say that!"

Langa swallowed, his heart thumping again, slow and honest in the hot, hot summer air. "Am I not allowed to?"

Reki's cheeks puffed up, and oh, oh his face was so warm, something so vulnerable in his eyes, something fierce and anxious and almost painful, in the way he squeezed Langa's hand, so tight the bones pressed together, and didn't let go. Langa could feel his heart pressing against his lungs as Reki's tongue pushed into his cheek, and Reki sounded so embarrassed, his voice cracking a little, when he said, "You...you're allowed."

And, oh.

Oh.

Langa felt himself breathe, and then he rubbed his thumb gently over the back of Reki's knuckles again, his raspy voice barely above a whisper as he said, "I like when you paint your nails bright colors and I like when you talk so fast I miss words, and I like when you groan over carrying those heavy boxes at work, and I, I like how you run around and blow off steam when you get upset, and I like how you pull me around after you, so we can be together, and, and." He swallowed, his face so so hot, because he could see the blush darkening on Reki's face, oh, he could feel Reki's pounding pulse in their joined palms, he could see how much Reki was struggled to hold the eye contact, but he was holding it, he was keeping his eyes on Langa's, his face scrunched up. Langa breathed out, feeling like he was giving up his heart, when he confessed, "I like it all."

Reki swallowed, and Langa could see the motion in his throat and oh, oh, he had to press his toes against the rubber of the ramp because Reki's knee was pressed to him, now, against his thigh and Langa hadn't realized how close they were, their arms brushing together, leaning toward each other instinctively, and oh, oh. Reki's face was warm, and his ears were red, his hair fluttering in the wind, and Langa could see his eyelashes when he glanced down, briefly, at their tangled hands on the half-pipe before lifting his gaze to Langa's again, and oh, oh, Langa's heart stuttered.

There was something fierce in Reki's eyes, like love.

"I like everything about you, too," Reki said, his voice low and scratchy, and Langa's heart stuttered again as Reki cleared his throat, once and then again, rubbing at his mouth before he could continue. "That's what...that's what I wanted to tell you earlier, at school. I like everything, even, even the stuff that we were just practicing."

And, oh.

Oh. Langa's heart stuttered again, and his heart began to swell against his ribs, the tiny flame in his chest reigniting, and oh, he was so afraid, so afraid of misunderstanding that he breathed out, "You liked it for...for real?"

"Yeah," said Reki, rubbing at his mouth furiously, squeezing his hand tighter, and his voice was a rush of stumbling words and fast sentences when he said, "I don't wanna stop, because

I like it so much, I liked all of it, I liked bringing you to the carnival and winning you stuff and seeing your eyes get so big, and I like kissing in the photobooth and, and when you wore that stupid shirt and I liked sleeping in the hotel room with you, and I liked waking up with you and seeing your messy hair and the way you look when you're yawning and, and, and I liked the part—the part where you called me baby, and—"

and, oh

oh

and oh Langa's world was expanding in his eyes, so bright and beautiful with Reki's burning hair at the very center of it, the edges catching fire in the sun, his hand squeezing Langa's hand with all his feelings burning through the skin, and then Reki scrunched up his cheeks and said,

"I like you," and oh oh oh, his eyes were so determined, fierce and intense, and he said, again, "I like *you* , Langa."

Langa couldn't breathe. For a moment he couldn't see anything but Reki, the tiny crease between his eyebrows, the fluttering hair around his face, so warm and textured and scarred from all the falls and the sunburns and the tears, all the places Langa had kissed, so soft and precious under his mouth, and then Reki swallowed, and oh, it was like the rest of the world was rushing back into place. Langa sucked in a breath, and oh, it felt like the first breath he had ever taken, his lungs expanding, filling with the hot summer air, the smell of sweat and rubber and *Reki,* and he burst out,

"I like you too," and oh, "I like you so — so much, Reki, Reki, I like you Reki, ah, Reki—"

And oh, oh, it felt better to say than he had ever imagined, and he breathed in another deep breath, and another, his chest heaving, and Reki's eyes went wide, the whole sun catching in the golden shine of his irises, and he stuttered out,

"You — you do?"

“Yes,” said Langa, and oh, oh the words were tumbling out, these words he never imagined he would be allowed to say, and *oh* they were so easy to say, so true, “You’re so wonderful, Reki, I like you so much. I like sleeping at your house and, and wearing your hoodies, and riding on the train, and skating with you, and I like holding your hand, I like it so much, can I, can I keep on holding it?”

Reki stared at him, his mouth catching on the breaths, something wide and disbelieving in his eyes. “Yeah,” he choked out, and *oh* his face was so red and his hair was so wild and he squeezed Langa’s hand, so tightly, the band-aids straining around his knuckles, and then his words were tripping over each other to say, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I like that too, I like, I like it a lot,” and Langa’s throat swelled, because, *oh.*

Reki liked him. Reki liked him, Langa, who had never imagined that he would be somebody worth liking.

It was almost impossible.

Almost. Almost, because he could feel the tight clasp of Reki’s fingers, he could see the way Reki’s eyes darted down to his mouth, he could see the swallow go down Reki’s throat and oh, oh. The world was huge and overwhelming and all of it was caught in Reki’s face, in the way his tongue pressed to the inside of his chest, and Langa’s lungs were expanding with all the air, as if some part of him was coming back to life, and oh, oh *Reki.*

“I like you,” Reki said, again, his tongue stumbling over the words, his cheeks flushing even hotter, and Langa’s heart swelled warm, because oh, the words sounded so good, how had he never imagined how good they would sound. “I like you so much, crap, I’ve liked you for, for a long time now. Do you really — you really like me back?”

Langa nodded hastily, and then he nodded again, squeezing Reki’s hand, because *oh* he liked Reki *so much.* The sunlight was like a halo around Reki’s hair and everything felt so surreal, too much for Langa’s brain to process, but his heart understood, his heart understood and it was fluttering excitedly, so happy, so happy because *oh,* oh Reki. “I like you so much,” he said, and then he repeated it, again and again until Reki was flushing again, and then he managed, “You really like me too? Like really?”

Reki huffed a laugh, a breathless laugh, his cheeks red, so red, and Langa's heart stuttered again when Reki grabbed his other hand, squeezing both of them. "Yeah," he said, and oh, the way he smiled, with his dimples deep in both cheeks, oh it made Langa's heart flutter faster. "Yeah, really. I—I like you a lot, like a lot."

And, oh. The warmth curled all the way down to Langa's toes, and he pressed closer to Reki, clinging to his hands, and Reki nudged their shoulders together, his face rosy. "I was going to confess," Langa blurted out. "I had, I had it all planned out," and oh, it felt so stupid now, how desperately he had wanted the confession to be perfect, because he could see the sweat stains dark against Reki's t-shirt, the way the fabric clung to his body, and he could feel the way the gravel dug into their joined palms and oh, oh.

The wind was tossing Reki's beautiful hair around his face, and he was smiling, his eyes squinting up at the corners with his face flushed so warm, red to the ears, glowing in the late afternoon sun with his feet knocking against the ramp of the halfpipe and of course Reki didn't want perfect.

He wanted *Langa.*

Langa squeezed his hands again, the hope so big and overwhelming around him, almost fragile, and said, "I was going to confess, because, because I couldn't hold it in anymore, how much I liked you."

Reki laughed again, lifting their joined hands to rub at his cheek, and oh, oh his skin was hot to the touch, and their knees pressed together, their ankles bumping. "Really?" said Reki, his voice still scratchy, his lopsided dimples etched into his warm, warm face. "I guess I won."

"I—I was going to do it first."

"Well, I beat you," said Reki, and he squeezed Langa's hands, both of them, gazing up at him, his eyes all glowy and affectionate, his face tilted to the side with the softest, softest smile, and Langa's heart thumped again, because *oh* that smile made him feel warm inside. He nearly squirmed with the feeling, because oh Reki was so pretty when he was happy, and Langa had *made* him happy, and Reki *liked* him. Langa could barely believe the happiness swelling in his chest.

And then Reki glanced down at their hands again, smoothing his thumbs over Langa's knuckles, and said, softly, "I was so nervous, dude, y'know? I thought you were gonna turn me down for sure. I just thought, like, Langa's so much cooler than me, he's such a good kisser, he'd be such a good boyfriend and there's no way he'd wanna be with somebody like me."

And oh, oh, no. Langa squeezed his hands, because *oh* he never wanted Reki to feel that way, as if he wasn't enough, because he was *more* than enough, he was sun and sky and everything good in the whole beautiful, beautiful world. "No," said Langa, watching his face, a bit desperately, until Reki finally raised his own eyes, too, and then Langa said, in a rush, "No, no, no. I thought you were going to turn *me* down," and Reki paused for a moment, his hands going still, and then he laughed.

He laughed, and he kicked Langa, and then it hit Langa, how ridiculous it was, and he startled himself into laughing too, and Reki leaned against him as they laughed and laughed, the sound bright and loud in the open air. And, oh. They had both been so afraid, of the same thing, of something so silly, and Langa felt his fears melting away as Reki's shoulders shook against him, their bodies hot and sweaty in all the places they were pressed together.

Together.

They laughed until they were breathless, their hands still clinging to each other, and oh, Langa's chest was so full, his heart overflowing with the rosy smile on Reki's face, how beautiful he looked when he was happy, and oh, Langa had never seen him so happy before. His cheeks ached with how much he was smiling, but he didn't want to stop, he never wanted to stop. "Y'know," said Reki, and then he nudged their thighs closer together, his hair tickling Langa's leg, "I like the kissing thing a lot. That's why I kept coming up with all those new excuses and stuff, so I could kiss you some more, 'cause I liked it so much."

And Langa laughed again, his hands a little trembly, the air so clear and fresh and real in his lungs. "I liked it, too," he said, and it felt too good to believe, to finally believe, that Reki had enjoyed the warm press of their lips as much as Langa did, that maybe at night Reki longed to kiss him the same way Langa did. "I liked — ah. I liked when you made noises during it, or, or when you got embarrassed."

Reki flushed a little, pushing lightly at his shoulder, hooking one of his ankles around Langa's to drag his leg closer. "You made noises, too," he said, and oh, oh that made Langa's stomach swoop, half-way through a laugh, and he tried to swallow, because Reki was red to the tips of his ears and he was suddenly *so* close. "And your heart was always beating so fast."

Langa's breath was sticking in his chest again, and oh, his face was so warm from the laughing and he tried not to look at Reki's mouth,

he tried, he tried but he couldn't help himself, his eyes dropped down to the pout of Reki's bottom lip, that dent that Langa had loved to kiss so much. He swallowed, again, and managed, "Because I liked you, that's why."

Reki huffed out a laugh, his eyes glancing down at Langa's mouth, too, and he pressed their arms even closer. "I like you, too," he said, and Langa's heart was thumping, because oh, he would never get tired of hearing that, would he? "I like being the only person who gets to kiss you."

And, ah, ah that was exactly the way Langa had felt, too, that was the way he *still* felt, he liked being the only person who got to hear Reki's breathless laugh, the only one who got to see his kiss-swollen mouth and his flushed cheeks. "Me, too," he managed, his voice a little raspy, and Reki shifted on the halfpipe, detangling one of their hands so he could slide his warm, warm hand against Langa's neck, into his hair, and Langa's heart thumped against his chest, and then it kept pounding, because oh he recognized the way Reki tilted his head, the soft hopeful curve of his smile.

"Can I," Reki asked, and Langa was nodding frantically before he could finish his sentence, and Reki laughed a little, with disbelief maybe, or happiness, and oh Langa could feel the happiness seeping through his entire body, coloring his skin all over, and he felt his breath hitch as Reki's eyes sank closed, and they both leaned in at the same time.

Their mouths pressed together softly, gentle, just as hesitant as the first night they had kissed, and Langa flushed warm, the way he always did, curling his toes in his shoes. Reki tilted his face carefully, his fingers tangling into Langa's hair, the pads of his fingers rough against the sensitive skin of Langa's neck, and oh, oh Langa had to swallow back a whimper, because Reki tasted like sticky soda and sweat, he tasted *good.* He tasted good, and his hand felt good

in Langa's hair, and when he touched his tongue gently to Langa's bottom lip, Langa's whole body burned, and clumsily he tried to touch his own tongue to Reki's mouth, too.

Around them the cicadas sang louder, and Langa could feel the summer sinking into his skin, still buzzing with the joy and disbelief of it all, and he squirmed against Reki's thigh as Reki slid his tongue, hot, over the seam of Langa's lips. Oh, oh. Oh, he was already panting into Reki's mouth, his heart burning with how much he was finally allowed to love him.

He fumbled to cup Reki's face, with his free hand, Reki sighed a little, nuzzling closer, tilting his face again so he could kiss Langa even more deeply, and oh, he was precious. He was precious, and Langa was dizzy with the sweet, intoxicating swipe of his tongue, with the way Reki sucked on his bottom lip, and oh, Langa squirmed again, trying not to whimper, trying to keep his heart from swelling up too big. He managed to press his own tongue to the dent in Reki's lips, and Reki made a raspy sound against him, and Langa did it again, until Reki was panting against his mouth, too.

They pulled away, just a bit, to catch their breath, and then they were kissing again, and Reki mumbled something against his mouth, kissing him and pulling back and kissing him again, and Langa couldn't hear his words but he could already feel himself beginning to smile against Reki's lips.

And then Reki's mouth stretched into a smile, too, so they could barely kiss anymore, and Reki laughed, against him, squeezing the side of Langa's neck gently, and Langa laughed too, until their shoulders were shaking and they were gasping into each others mouth, trying to kiss clumsily through the laughter.

Langa loved him.

"I like you," he gasped in between laughs, as Reki pressed his lips to the corner of Langa's mouth, teasing, and then Reki laughed again, his cheeks warming under Langa's fingers, and he said,

"I like you, too," and then, "God, Langa," and then he was hauling Langa in again, laughing against his mouth, kissing him deeply, and Langa nearly choked on a laugh because, *oh.* Reki's mouth was sweet and warm and perfect, and his tongue swept hot over Langa's bottom lip for just a moment, and Langa whimpered, clutching him, because oh, god. Reki

kissed him as if he understood him, as if he knew him, every single one of Langa's weaknesses and imperfections, as if he *loved* him.

Langa managed to suck briefly at his bottom lip, pressing his teeth against the tiny dent, and Reki made a noise in his throat, his thumb rubbing over the pulse point in Langa's neck, and oh, god, oh god. Langa pulled away with a gasp, his heart hammering in his throat, in his cheeks, in the palms of his hands, hot against Reki's skin, and then Reki whispered, "Sorry, sorry," and kissed him sweet on the mouth again, and oh, oh.

Langa melted against him again, and for a long while they just cherished the feeling of each other's skin, the damp press of lips, the hot touch of their tongues together, the rough calluses and band-aid edges rubbing against their palms. They kissed until Langa was breathless, until his skin was a warm, warm pink all over his body, until Reki's cheeks were so flushed that he looked like he might be overheating, out here in the hot summer night.

"One sec," Reki gasped, against his mouth, and then he laughed a little, breathlessly, fumbling to unscrew the cap of his soda again. He gulped down several swallows, and then he pressed the edge of the bottle to Langa's mouth, and Langa's stomach swooped again, warm, so warm. Reki tipped the bottle, and Langa swallowed, drinking until his throat didn't feel so parched anymore, until he could breathe again. Reki dropped the bottle in between them, nudging their foreheads together, and asked, a little cheeky, "Good?"

Langa swallowed, nodding, and then Reki kissed him again, a soft peck on the lips. "I love you," Langa whispered, and his heart squirmed with happiness at the slow, soft smile that spread over Reki's face.

"I love you, too," Reki said, his voice low and affectionate, his cheeks rounding out into the smile, and when he whispered, "Langa," it made Langa shiver, because no one had ever said his name that way before, and he hoped no one else ever would, no one except Reki.

"I love you," Langa whispered again, and Reki whispered it back, against his lips, kissing him softly until the words had sunk into every inch of Langa's body, his skin burning under the setting sun. He had never imagined, in all of his fantasies and daydreams, that anything could sound as wonderful as those words.

The kisses were overwhelming sweet, every single one of them, and Langa kept his eyes closed, breathing them in. He had always wondered what it would feel like, to kiss Reki for real, instead of for practice, but the kissing felt the same as always. Reki's mouth was warm and thrilling and wonderful, and his cheeks still felt perfect and sunburnt and scraped-up underneath Langa's fingertips. Of course it felt the same, Langa thought, melting into Reki's touch with a soft sigh, feeling Reki's mouth press gently to his cheek, and then to his mouth again.

Langa was the same Langa he had always been, with the same trembly hands and anxious heart and stumbling accent, and Reki was the same Reki, warm and imperfect and beautiful.

And Langa had been in love with him all along.

Chapter End Notes

ahhh we finally got here! it definitely took them long enough. I think some of y'all were doubting me for a second there, but I hope this chapter helped to soothe your broken heart~

you'll notice I upped the chapter count so I can write an epilogue. I promise that yua will get here happy ending, and more things will be tied up/resolved in the next chapter! thank you all so much for your overwhelming support lately. I have been reading and loving all of your comments, even the sad ones :)

here is some lovely art from the last chapter!! please check out all of these talented artists omg I love them all so much.

claripaint on instagram
spacedruid on instagram
dinoo._.nuggiess on instagram
stavrodite on tumblr

once again thank you so, so much for reading! I hope you continue to enjoy the rest of the story. until next time~

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

throws 14k of fluff at y'all and runs

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Langa and Reki clung to each other's hands all the way home, hurrying up the dark steps of Langa's apartment, fumbling with Langa's keys at his door. The night air was stiflingly warm, and Langa's body buzzed with excitement, and it was hard to get the key into the slot. His heart kept thrumming with *he loves me, he loves me, he loves me* and it was so overwhelming that Langa's breath came quickly, his hands clumsy on the key ring.

"Hey," said Reki, reaching for Langa, but instead of helping him unlock the door, Reki put his hand on Langa's shoulder and turned Langa to face him. Langa's skin tingled under his touch, *oh god he loves me he loves me,* and then Reki was leaning up, slow and a bit hesitant, to kiss him.

Langa made a muffled, surprised sound when their lips met, and Reki's eyes fluttered closed and then opened again, and god his mouth was so hot and chapped in the summer night. Then Reki pulled back, puffing a warm breath onto Langa's lips, and Langa choked out, "What—what was that for?"

"Sorry," said Reki, bouncing once, on the balls of his feet, his free hand coming up to cup Langa's face, and Langa shivered a little, pressing into him. Reki cleared his throat, and Langa caught the sliver of doubt in his eyes as he said, "Just, hah...wanted to make sure it was real. Should I not have…"

"No," said Langa hurriedly, "no, you should have, uh, hang on—hang on," and he let the keys hang from the lock as he turned and grabbed Reki's upper arm, leaning in to kiss his mouth again, and then, oh, he meant to stop, but Reki's mouth was so dry and sweet that Langa kissed it again, and then again. His stomach swooped when Reki made this satisfied, throaty sound against him, tipping his head and deepening the kiss, and *oh,* oh Langa's mind was already going warm and fuzzy again.

It felt so *good.* And Reki pressed closer, up on his tiptoes maybe, and god, he was eager, so eager to kiss Langa, because he wanted to, because he liked it, because he loved him, and oh *he loves me he loves me he loves me.* Langa clung to Reki's arm, warm and damp with sweat, and half-moaned as Reki tilted his face, kissing him deeper, because oh, he still tasted like soda and the skatepark. He grabbed Reki's waist instead of his arm, his fingers digging into the soft, soft skin there, head swimming with the *noise* Reki made and oh, *god,* Reki.

Langa would never be able to get enough of him.

"I like you," Reki mumbled against him, threading his fingers into Langa's hair, and ah, Langa's mind was going even fuzzier, blurring a little, at the way Reki's fingers pressed into the base of his head, tilting Langa's head to meet him, and he could feel himself panting as Reki sucked on his bottom lip, and oh, Jesus, Jesus. How, how had Reki gotten him so riled up so quickly? Reki slid his tongue wetly across Langa's mouth, and Langa gasped a breath and squeezed his waist and managed,

"Reki,"

and Reki hummed, "Yeah," and went to suck on Langa's bottom lip again but *dear god* they were in front of Langa's *home,* his mother's home, and so with some difficulty Langa managed to turn his face away, gasping, feeling the blush hot on his face as he pushed his hand against Reki's mouth.

"We—not here," Langa managed, and god, his face was so hot, and Reki choked out an embarrassed laugh, ducking out from under Langa's hand.

"Ah, crap," he said, laughing again, rubbing his mouth. "Right. Right. Sorry. I got distracted." Even in the dusk, Langa could see the warm flush on Reki's cheeks, but Reki was smiling, something soft and shamefaced and eager, squeezing Langa's palm again and Langa cleared his throat, his very dry throat, trying not to look at the shadows of Reki's dimples.

"Are you going to get distracted all the time now?" Langa managed, and Reki breathed a laugh, swinging their hands between them and squeezing Langa's fingers.

“Man, I sure hope so,” he said, his smile a little cheeky now, reassured, leaning in again to peck Langa’s cheek quickly, and Langa felt himself flushing, trying to hide his red cheeks with his hand. Dear god. Dear *god.* Reki was going to be the death of him. Langa could already imagine him hopping up onto the counter of DopeSketch and pulling Langa in between his knees, the late afternoon sun streaming through the windows as he whispered *“Kiss me?”* hopefully against Langa’s mouth, beautiful, beautiful Reki, sweaty and warm underneath his fingertips.

And, oh, they could kiss all the time now, whenever they wanted, couldn’t they? Langa’s stomach squirmed as he pictured long long summer days spent on Reki’s bed, making out with him while the fan whirred softly through the room, long lazy shifts spent holding Reki’s warm hand behind the counter, long nights with Reki’s hand carding through his hair, whispering *I love you* into each other’s ears, coming up with compliments to make each other breathless. Oh, Langa was so warm thinking about it, his stomach squirming again, and hastily he shoved his shoulder against the door, wedging it open, pulling Reki inside.

The apartment was quiet, and they hurried for Langa’s bedroom, tumbling over each other. Langa’s heartbeat was still thrumming in his sweaty palm, *he loves me he loves me he loves me,* and it all felt so big and fragile and overwhelming, like it could disappear any moment, like it was a dream. Quickly Langa fumbled to lock his bedroom door behind him and turned around, and then, oh, oh.

He stopped, his face flushing anew.

Reki was gazing at the sunflowers on his nightstand, fingering one of the petals carefully.

“These are so pretty,” he said, soft, approving, glancing over at Langa. Langa tried to swallow, because Reki seemed to glow under the yellow of Langa’s bedroom lights, his limbs sunburnt and agile as he touched the flowers, the flowers Langa had never thought he would see. Clumsily Langa cleared his throat.

“They, uh.” His mind raced, trying to come up with an explanation, but he couldn’t lie to Reki, especially not now. His face was warm when he admitted, “They’re sort of...for you.”

He could feel the sweat rolling down his back as Reki’s eyebrows shot up, and he shifted nervously, because what if Reki didn’t like them? What if they were the wrong color, or the

wrong smell, or god, what if Reki was allergic to sunflowers? He rubbed his sweaty, trembling hands on his pants as Reki glanced at the flowers, then back at Langa, and repeated, “For *me* ?”

“Yeah,” Langa managed. Reki gazed back at the flowers with something akin to wonder on his face, and then a smile broke over his face, almost incredulous, so sudden and so excited that Langa’s heart stuttered because, ah.

Reki *did* like them.

“You got me flowers!” Reki said, turning to him again, bounding across the room to grab Langa’s arm, his body practically vibrating. “Dude, dude! That’s so sick! Nobody’s ever gotten me flowers before, except my mom and that doesn’t count, oh man, oh man where did you get them? Did you buy them from Shadow? Oh, man, now I need to get you a romantic present too, this is awesome, oh boy, I can buy you so much romantic stuff now and it’s gonna be great and you’re gonna be so wowed, oh man—”

“I,” Langa blurted out, and Reki paused, watching him with an excited shine in his eyes, and oh, god, he was so pretty, he was so pretty and he liked Langa and Langa was allowed to like him back, and his palms were sweating so much when he said, “I got you another—another present. Do you want it?”

Reki’s eyes went wider, and he spluttered a little before grabbing Langa’s other arm, squeezing him tightly. “Dude, do I ever! Oh man! Oh, man, you weren’t kidding when you said you were gonna confess to me!”

“Of course I wasn’t kidding,” mumbled Langa, his face warm, his hands so sweaty, and then Reki threw his arms around Langa’s body, crushing him in a hug, and he started laughing against Langa’s chest, tipping their foreheads together, squeezing him. And, oh, Langa’s whole body flushed warm, their chests pressed together, and he couldn’t smother the smile tugging at his mouth, because his fingers were tingling and the butterflies in his chest were fluttering, and Reki liked him, Reki liked him, Reki liked him. Langa’s heart swelled so big that it threatened to spill right out of him, and he hugged Reki back, pressing his mouth to his shoulder to stifle the shy, nervous laugh bubbling in his throat, squeezing his eyes shut.

Reki liked him. He liked the flowers, and he liked Langa, and Langa hugged his soft waist, holding him tightly, burying his face in Reki's sweaty t-shirt. He breathed in the smell of dirt and rubber and oh, it was so nice, Reki was so nice and Langa wanted to give him so many things, he wanted to give him the whole world.

"Show me!" Reki gasped out, pushing against Langa's stomach, and Langa's heart fluttered again. "I wanna see what you got me."

Langa lifted his face, his face warm. "Sit on the bed?"

Reki glanced over his shoulder and then said, "Okay!" He scrambled quickly backward, bouncing onto the middle of Langa's bed, his legs sprawling across the soft quilt, and he looked so good that Langa almost followed him. He wanted to curl up under the covers with Reki, cuddling until both of them were sighing with contentment, their hands on each other's waists under their t-shirts, snuggled together from head to toe. He just knew it would be the warmest thing in the world, holding hands under the blankets, kissing each other's cheeks and whispering *I like you* until they were laughing and hugging, and maybe, maybe they could do that tonight. Langa wiggled his toes against the carpet, his chest fuzzy and happy, because oh, they could do that whenever they wanted to, now, and he could tell Reki all the things he liked about him, the stretch marks on his waist and the flip-flop tanlines on his feet and, and, and Langa's heart was swelling again, giddy, and so quickly he made himself hurry to the closet.

He wavered in the doorway, looking at all the presents, because he wanted to pile all of them into Reki's lap at once, but then he thought about saving some of them, waiting until Reki was least expecting it. His toes curled against the carpet again, and he could feel himself smiling at the thought, Reki's face going red in surprise as he sputtered out a thank you each time Langa produced a new present. Langa shifted his weight back and forth, back and forth, trying to decide which one to give him today, and then he grabbed the big, soft blanket with sleeves out of his closet and turned back to the bed.

"Here," he said, his face rosy, stepping across the room and stuffing the blanket into Reki's waiting hands. "I thought you would like it because, because you always like soft things and your hoodies and all that."

For a moment Reki just gazed down at the blanket, his eyes wide, and then he was a flurry of motion, scrambling to his feet, lifting the blanket, holding it against himself. "It has sleeves!"

he said, and Langa's face warmed, at how cute he was, his face flushed up to his ears, spinning the blanket around and trampling across the mattress so he could show Langa how he slid his arms into the oversized sleeves, his feet sinking into the quilt. "It has sleeves, Langa, look, oh man, where did you find this? This is epic. Oh man, my sisters are gonna try to steal this for sure, but I'm gonna keep it forever, I'm gonna hide it from them, oh man, Langa, oh man oh man oh man."

Langa's chest was tingling, and he stifled another laugh, his whole body buzzing with how *happy* Reki seemed, how precious. Langa had made him happy, and he was flushed warm with pride. "You like it?" he asked, and Reki laughed a little, scrambling over to grab his hand and tug him up onto the bed, and Langa stumbled a little, his socks slipping on the bedframe. Reki let out a quick "oops" and caught him around the waist before he fell and then, and then they were wobbling on the mattress together, Reki's hands on his hips, and oh, Langa's mouth was sort of dry when he laughed, his heart pounding, the butterflies beating their wings furiously in his stomach. Reki's hands were so warm, bundled up in Langa's present, and he was so close, so so so close, holding onto Langa.

"Of course I like it!" Reki squeezed his hips, and Langa choked on his laugh, squirming under his hands, a hot flush spreading through his chest. "You thought about me! About what I would like!"

And, oh, Langa could feel the callouses of his palms through his thin t-shirt, the way Reki was holding his waist, his whole body going warm. "I—I think about you a lot," he admitted, his face flushed, grabbing onto Reki's elbows as the quilt shifted, unsteady, under his feet. Reki laughed, a bit embarrassed, squeezing Langa's hips again to steady him, and oh, oh if Langa's face got any warmer he was probably going to pass out.

He dropped his head onto Reki's shoulder, his heart thrumming, because Reki was *so cute* and warm and pretty, and Reki laughed again, still holding Langa upright. "I think about you a lot, too," he said, and Langa made a muffled choking noise against him. Reki's thumbs hooked in the belt loops of Langa's pants, tugging just a little, and Langa's whole body flushed warm as Reki continued, "I think about you wearing my hoodies and everybody knowing you're mine, and, ah, I think about you drinking out of my water bottles, and cuddling you while we watch movies on the couch, and calling you pet names, and, and, and I think about you getting all flustered, you're so cute when you're flustered, you know that? Really freaking cute."

Langa made another muffled noise, too embarrassed for words, and Reki laughed softly, wrapping his arms around Langa's waist and pulling him in, and Langa choked, stumbling.

He tried to catch himself on Reki's shoulders, but it was too late, he was slipping and Reki was tripping backward with a shout and together they tumbled down onto the pillows.

Reki made a muffled "oof" sound as Langa's body thumped on top of him, and oh, god, he was so warm, his face burning, their limbs tangled together, sinking into the mattress. Langa pushed himself up onto his elbows, his hair hanging around his face, and Reki blinked up at him, his mouth tugging up into a grin. The blanket sleeves were still caught around his sprawling arms, and even though Langa's body was flushed and embarrassed, he couldn't help laughing, because *god* Reki was cute, his hair splayed out all over the pillows. Then Reki was laughing, too, punching clumsily at Langa's arm, and Langa collapsed on top of him again, gasping laughs with his cheek pressed to the sweaty front of Reki's t-shirt.

Everything felt too wonderful to be real. But it was real, and oh, Langa couldn't stop the laughter bubbling up in his chest, the joy, the love, so he smothered his mouth in Reki's collar and soaked in all of the lovely vibrating sounds coming through his chest.

They lay there for a while, shoulders shaking against each other, and Reki put his hands on Langa's back while he stifled his laughter, holding him tight. Langa's whole body felt warm when he lifted his head again, and Reki grinned down at him, pushing his tongue against his tooth gap. "Can I?" Reki murmured, his fingers tickling the hem of Langa's t-shirt, barely ghosting over the skin underneath questioningly. Langa shivered and nodded, his heartbeat beginning to thrum in his cheeks again, and gently Reki's fingers skimmed the two inches of Langa's exposed spine. Langa shuddered again, clamping his mouth shut so he wouldn't make a noise and Reki laughed, breathless, as the traitorous blush rose in Langa's cheeks again.

"Man," Reki said, letting his head fall back against the pillows, a smile in his voice, "I could do this forever."

"Do wh— *ah,* " and Langa had to bury his face in Reki's chest again as Reki lifted the hem of his shirt another inch, pressing his palms to the skin of Langa's back, giving another breathless laugh. Langa tried not to whimper, but it was hard because Reki's palms were so rough and warm and sweet and he was holding Langa against his body, and Langa's uniform pants were rumpled and dirty from the park and his shirt was in disarray and Reki was touching him because he *wanted* to. Reki wanted to, and Langa squirmed, raising his head again with an even darker flush.

“Okay?” whispered Reki, and Langa swallowed and nodded and then shook his head.

“I wanna change,” he said, and Reki said, “Oh—ah,” as if he had just remembered that they were still wearing their grimy skatepark clothes. For a moment neither of them moved, and Langa was about to mumble *never mind* and bury his face in Reki’s sweaty t-shirt again, but then Reki shifted underneath him, trying to sit up.

Reluctantly Langa rolled off of him, still aching with the warmth of their bodies pressed together. Reki sat up, his hair wild around his face, and then leaned his shoulder against Langa’s back, mumbling, “I liked that,” and Langa’s neck flushed. Oh, he thought, trying not to squirm again.

“Me too,” he managed, and then he was too embarrassed to say anything else, so he scrambled off the bed and hurried to his dresser. He needed to find clean clothes for Reki, too, so he hunted for the softest sweatpants and t-shirt he owned, pajamas with his initials scribbled onto the tags in permanent marker, and then turned around and pushed the clothes into Reki’s waiting hands.

“Ah,” said Reki, “thanks.” He started struggling with the blanket cloak, trying to change his clothes without taking it off, and Langa smothered both a flush and a smile as he turned back to the dresser, his heart fluttered in his chest.

The room felt warmer than ever as they both changed clothes quickly, Reki hopping around trying to fit one leg into the sweatpants, Langa wrestling to get his pajama shirt over his head. Reki had slept over so many times before, bundled up in Langa’s clothes, tucked underneath his blankets, but tonight everything felt fuzzy and tingly with the promise of being allowed to kiss him between the pillows, to hold his hands carefully and maybe even kiss his bandaged, clumsy knuckles. They would be allowed to cuddle the whole night through, and maybe in the morning Langa could kiss Reki good-morning on his sleep-warm mouth, and, and…

“Langa?” Reki asked, and Langa turned around, and oh. Oh. He swallowed, pressing his hands to the front of his sweatpants, because Reki was holding up a crumpled envelope that Langa had left in the trash yesterday, the smudged blank ink spelling out *Reki,* the edges damp and wrinkled from all the crying. “Is this...for me?” asked Reki hesitantly.

Langa swallowed again. “I...yeah. It was.”

Reki glanced down at the envelope and then back up at Langa. Langa could feel his palms beginning to sweat again, and then Reki said, his voice cracking a little, “Is it — a confession letter?”

Langa pressed his toes into the soft carpet, trying to resist the urge to hug himself. He felt a bit sweaty and shy with the way Reki was looking at him, as if he had never seen Langa before. Maybe the idea of a confession embarrassed him. “Yeah,” said Langa, and Reki blinked at him and Langa squirmed, stuttering a little when he asked, “Is that—is that okay?”

Reki glanced down at the envelope again as Langa’s heart pounded, once, against his ribs. Reki rubbed the back of his neck, clearing his throat, and then said, “Yeah, it’s just—no one’s ever—I mean, I’ve never, I’ve never gotten one before.”

Langa blinked, and then the words settled into his brain, the way Reki’s cheeks were darkening in the moonlight. Reki shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and then glanced down at the envelope again, rubbing his thumb over the smeared characters of his name, and blurted out,

“Can I keep it? I mean, I know, I know it was in the trash but I, I always kinda wanted—”

And then Langa was saying hastily, “Reki,” and Reki’s words fumbled to a stop, and oh, Langa’s neck was so warm, his heart pressing against his chest. “Of course you can have it,” Langa said, tripping over himself a little to get across the carpet to Reki, grabbing his upper arms, and Reki shivered a little, pressing the toes of his socks to Langa’s feet, and for a moment they just stared at each other, breathing shakily in the moonlight. “I want...I want you to have it,” Langa said, more softly, even though his stomach squirmed a little at the thought of Reki reading his most private thoughts, all the unfiltered adoration Langa had poured into those pages. Reki had never gotten a confession letter before. He had never gotten to read compliments about his contagious laugh and his enthusiastic energy and his sunshine smile, and, oh, he deserved to know those things, he deserved to know how wonderful Langa thought he was, and Langa swallowed, hard.

Reki deserved so much.

“Can I read it?” Reki asked, sort of awkward, rubbing his elbow, as if he didn’t quite know what to say. Langa nodded, and then he kept nodding, his heart thumping, squeezing Reki’s arms.

“Of course,” Langa said, “of course,” and then, “Can we, can we get back in bed first? I want…”

He wanted to cuddle, but he was too embarrassed to say so. Luckily Reki nodded quickly, stumbling over to the bed again, and together they scrambled underneath the quilt. Reki clumsily arranged the blanket with sleeves around himself as Langa settled down close to him, as close as he dared, their knees bumping together. He pressed his toes against the sheets, dragging the quilt up over them, his heart in his throat because they were *so close,* and he wanted to cuddle so badly, he wanted to put his arms around Reki’s waist, he wanted Reki to wrap that blanket around both of them and pull Langa even closer. He could feel the warmth of Reki’s blush radiating off his face, he could feel Reki’s soft puffs breath against his face, and he had to fist his hands in the quilt, breathing out slowly to try to cool down the hot flush on his cheeks.

“Can I,” Langa managed, and Reki glanced up at him, and Langa’s throat felt dry, because oh, Reki’s eyes were big and brown in the darkness, and he looked so soft, and Langa liked him so much, so much he could barely breathe.

“What?” Reki asked, barely above a breath, and Langa nudged their knees together, swallowing, embarrassed.

“I wanna,” and he couldn’t explain all the things he wanted. He had wanted this for so long, to snuggle close under the covers and kiss Reki’s forehead and hold his hands, and now that they were finally here, he felt all tongue-tied and flustered. “Can you.” Why was it so hard to form the words? Reki had already said that he liked Langa, he had laughed *I love you* against Langa’s mouth, his face was so honest and open and wide-eyed in the darkness and still Langa struggled with words, but finally he got out, “Can you put the blanket over me, too?”

Reki glanced down at the quilt draped over both of their shoulders, his forehead creasing in confusion, but then his eyes caught on his blanket with sleeves and his mouth formed an understanding *oh.* “Of course, Langa,” he said, scooting closer, and Langa shivered at the way Reki said his name, so low and soft and careful, pronouncing the syllables as if they were distinct and precious. Carefully Reki lifted his arm and wrapped the blanket around

both of them, his hand settling on Langa's back, pulling him close, and Langa closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in, his heart swelling up again, because oh it was so *warm* . It was so warm that he could cry, and their thighs pressed together, and before he could think clearly Langa was fisting his hand in the front of Reki's t-shirt, hanging onto him, and Reki made a quiet noise in his throat.

"Langa," he whispered again, bringing his hand up to smooth Langa's hair off his face, away from his flushed ears. "You like this?"

Langa nearly choked on his breath as he nodded. His heart was burning, so so warm in his chest, and his palms were so sweaty when he tugged on Reki's shirt, because *oh* he had been chasing this feeling for so long, the feeling of Reki's warm arm settled over him, their socked feet snuggled together under all the blankets, their chests only a breath apart so that he could feel the rise and fall of Reki's breathing. He had dreamed about this feeling, but it was so much better than he had ever imagined, and he felt so good, so *safe.*

"You like cuddling," Reki whispered, smoothing his hair again, still clutching the confession letter between them. "Mm. I'll remember that."

Langa couldn't smother the soft noise he made, his face and his chest burning, because he could hear the love in Reki's voice when he said that, when he leaned forward and kissed the tip of Langa's cold nose. Reki cleared his throat a little, settling back against the pillows, and whispered,

"Can I read now?"

And Langa swallowed and nodded and squeezed his eyes open, easing his grip on Reki's t-shirt so he could smooth his hand over Reki's chest, a clumsy attempt to care for Reki the way Reki was caring for him, and maybe it worked, because he felt the hitch in Reki's breath and the way Reki's eyes went heavy-lidded. Then Reki cleared his throat again, fumbling to get the letter open one-handed because the other hand was still tangled in Langa's hair, and after a moment he used his teeth to tear the envelope, and Langa managed a laugh. His voice was sort of hoarse when he said, "That's how you treat my confession?"

"Stop," said Reki, kicking at him under the blankets, then hooking his leg around Langa's calf and tugging him closer, and Langa choked on the laugh again, swallowing. Reki pulled

the letter out of the envelope, his eyes skimming over the top of the page, and Langa's cheeks itched, because god, he could barely remember what he had written in that letter. What if it was horribly embarrassing? God, had he written about staring at Reki's mouth in class? He had to swallow back the urge to grab the letter from Reki's hands, but then Reki was peering over the top of the pages, fighting a smile. "Okay," he said, "don't take this the wrong way, but—"

"Oh my god," Langa blurted, already mortified, but hastily Reki waved the papers around, nearly hitting him in the face.

"Nonono," he said, "It's not bad! It's not bad." He tightened his grip on Langa's waist, hauling him even closer, and Langa screwed up his face, trying to calm down the anxious thundering of his heart as Reki said, "It's just, your handwriting, it's—" He paused, his mouth working around a stifled laugh, and oh, god. "Okay, it's kinda horrendous. Do you think—do you think you could read it for me?"

Langa's cheeks itched again, embarrassed for a whole *new* reason. "You mean— *aloud* ?"

Reki cleared his throat, still smiling, his face so warm in the darkness. "Would you?" He shifted against Langa, tugging his legs closer with his ankle, and Langa pressed his hand to Reki's chest again, trying to breathe because Reki was so beautiful and so close, and how could Langa ever deny him anything? Reki just wanted to be loved, and oh, Langa had ached for so long to be allowed to love him. "I really...I really wanna know what it says."

Langa rubbed his sweaty hands in the hem of Reki's t-shirt, nodding, even though he could barely begin to imagine how embarrassing it would be to stumble over the words of his own confession. At least if he was reading aloud, he could skip over anything too humiliating, so he tugged on the papers, turning them around so he could see his wobbly handwriting across the top of the first page.

He cleared his throat. "It says, dear Reki," he said, and then he had to bury his face in the pillows, his cheeks burning, and Reki laughed a little, shy, wrapping his arms around Langa again to hug him closer. Their chests pressed together, and Langa's throat was so dry and his heart was swollen against his ribs and he just wanted to lie there all night and try to telepathically send his feelings directly through their skin, so he wouldn't have to say them with words.

But Reki nudged their feet together, and Langa rubbed at his cheek and tried to lift his head again. He knew Reki wanted to hear the words. They were important to him, the words, and so Langa cleared his throat again and began to read.

"Dear Reki," he said, and then, with a shaky breath, "I wish you could teach me how to write a love letter." Already he could feel Reki's ears perking up, all his attention focused on Langa, and Langa tried to keep his eyes on the paper and his voice steady as he said, "You teach me so much. You teach me how to skate better every day, and how to dodge the teachers in the courtyard so we don't get detention, and what foods I should never buy at the convenience store, no matter how hungry I am, and you teach me how—how to feel comfortable in my skin, even with all the bruises, and you teach me that it's okay to ask for help, if I need it. Nobody ever taught me those things before. Nobody ever taught me how to write a love letter, either, and I can't really ask you for help this time, so I guess I will just do my best."

Reki let out a breath against him, tightening his hand around Langa's body, sliding it down to the small of Langa's back, but if Langa looked at him now, he knew he would lose his nerve. So he just swallowed through his dry, dry throat and worked out,

"I like you so much, Reki. I like you ringing up customers at the counter of DopeSketch and I like you doodling on your arm in the middle of class and I like you knee-deep in the ocean with your shorts rolled up and I like you holding my hand, and I like you when your voice gets all fast and excited when you're talking about skating, and I like you when you're impatient with me and you start pouting, and I like you when you're plastering those colorful band-aids all over your body. I like you so much. I don't have any pretty words for it but, but I think you're pretty enough on your own, and you should know that, you should know that I like your hands and your dimples and the freckles on your shoulders and the crease on your forehead when you frown and the soft hair on your legs and I like, I like your stomach when I get to see it, and thank you for letting me see it, because it's so beautiful. And I like your laugh. I like when you say my name. I like talking to you, and I think I want to do it every day for the rest of my life, and is that too much to write in a love letter? I don't know, I don't know anything, I just know that I love everything about you and I, I wanted you to know that."

Reki made a muffled sound, and Langa swallowed, his cheeks so warm, flipping over the page. He glanced over the top, and his heart squeezed, because oh, Reki had the corner of the blanket tugged over his mouth and nose, but Langa could still see the hot blush rising up to his ears, and his heart thumped. Clumsily Langa cleared his throat.

“There’s—there’s more, do you want me to—”

“Langa,” Reki choked out, and then he raised his face, his cheeks burning bright, and smushed Langa’s face between his palms. “Langa, you are so—so freaking cute, do you even realize—”

And, oh, Langa’s face was burning now, too. “I am not—”

“You *are* .”

“You’re the cute one, I—”

“Langa,” Reki said again, his voice all strained and breathy, and then he used his ankle to tug Langa even closer, their bodies pressed together so warm underneath the blankets, and Langa could feel the hot blush spreading down to his chest. “Langa, Langa, I love you, I love you so much.” He kissed Langa’s cheek, once and then twice, fierce and intense until Langa was shivering against him. Then Reki breathed out, “Can you, can you read the rest?”

And, ah. Langa wasn’t sure he could ever say anything again, but he managed to work the words out of his mouth, his eyes skimming along the crooked characters he had tried so hard to write clearly. The letter was less coherent than Langa remembered, and it kept skipping back to repeat things he had already said, sometimes jumping topics entirely in the middle of an unfinished sentence. It wasn’t perfect, but Reki’s breath hitched every time Langa stumbled over some detail that made him squirm, the talking thing, the way he skated better than anybody else when it was storming, and the way he always asked if the kissing was good when they were finished. “It’s always good,” Langa said, his face so warm, and Reki made another muffled sound against the blankets. “It’s always perfect, but I just think, I think it’s cute that you ask.”

Reki’s face popped up, and then he was tugging the pages out of the way, his face so bright and red and his chest heaving. “Langa,” he said, and his voice cracked a little, and he winced. “Langa. You wrote all of that about *me* ?”

Langa swallowed. “Yes,” he managed, and Reki’s hands pressed to his back as he gave another choked-off noise, almost desperate in the way he hugged Langa to himself. “I told you I...I think about you a lot. And I wanted to put the thoughts down so, so maybe you could understand how wonderful you are.”

Reki squirmed, tightening his hold on Langa. “Can I write one for you?”

Langa flushed again, even warmer, in surprise. “What?”

“Can I write you a love letter too?” Reki asked, and then he was saying, all in a rush, “I wanna tell you how great you are, too, like, like, like how cool you are when you skate, and how much I like it when you laugh at my jokes, even when they’re not funny, and how cute your terrible handwriting is, hah, and, and your hot accent, and I liked seeing you wear that crop top and, and I like kissing you and stuff and, and, and,” and his eyes darted down to Langa’s mouth, and Langa felt his throat going dry, his chest thumping as Reki’s feet bumped against his, his hair wild against the pillows.

“You can write one if you want to,” Langa managed. His heart felt so hot, thinking about reading a love letter Reki wrote for him, a letter he could tuck away in a safe place and read, again and again and again, whenever he felt insecure. He swallowed, because somehow Reki *always* knew what Langa needed, and oh, the way Reki was clinging to him made his head spin, and then Reki was looking at his mouth again and Langa thought about kissing him, about lying in this bed and kissing until their mouths were sore and gasping *I love you* into each other’s mouths and oh, oh, oh.

He could barely breathe, with how much he wanted it.

“Can I,” Reki said, and Langa could only think *yes yes yes,* and then Reki asked, his throat raspy, “Can I try something?”

Langa was nodding as quickly as he could. “Yes,” he said, his heart pressed to his chest, because god, he hoped the something involved Reki kissing him breathless, and then Reki scrambled up and swung one of his legs over Langa’s body. Langa’s heart stuttered, at the sight of Reki’s messy hair and broad shoulders with Langa’s t-shirt stretched over his arms, and then Reki settled down on top of him, shuffling his body so that he was lying on top of Langa’s chest, and all the breath left Langa’s lungs in a *whoosh.*

His head went fuzzy, his neck hot, because, *oh,* god. Reki was lying on top of him, and the weight of his body felt so good that Langa could cry. He struggled for another breath, fisting his hands in the sides of Reki's t-shirt, his throat swelling with the rush of feelings, all his nerve endings alight.

Reki shifted a little, propping himself up on his elbows, looking down at Langa. "Am I heavy?" he asked, and Langa groaned, a little.

"Yeah," he managed, and oh, god. "Ah, it's...it's perfect."

Reki laughed a little, breathless. Carefully he reached up and used both of his hands to smooth Langa's hair off his face, his fingers so gentle as Langa's heart squeezed, so tightly, because oh *god,* the blanket was nearly smothering him, warm and cozy and soft, as if nothing could hurt him, nothing could ever touch him except the sweet, sweet brush of Reki's fingertips. He could feel Reki's breathing and the twitch of Reki's impatient feet, and he managed to say,

"Makes me feel...safe,"

and Reki did the laughing thing again, ducking his head to kiss the acne scars on Langa's chin. Langa shuddered underneath him, and Reki said, "Aw, Langa," and smoothed Langa's hair off his forehead again. Langa could hear the soft smile in Reki's voice when he said, "You know you're always safe around me, right?"

Langa swallowed, and then he was nodding, because he *did* know, Reki had always made him feel loved and protected and cared for. Even when bad things happened, they always had a safe place here, snuggled up with each other, touching each other's faces with gentle fingertips. "You, too," Langa choked out, opening his eyes, watching the way Reki's eyes crinkled at the corners, with the smile.

"I know," Reki murmured. He kissed the corner of Langa's mouth, and Langa's breathing hitched, his heart thumping. "I like this. I thought you might like it too, 'cause you liked it when I sat on your lap so much."

Langa squeezed his eyes shut again, trying to breathe, trying not to blush too hard, but it was probably too late because Reki was laughing again, against him, peppering his face with kisses.

"Langa," Reki mumbled, the smile so soft in his voice when he kissed Langa's left eyebrow, the one that never quite grew in correctly, "It's okay. I liked it, too, okay? I liked everything."

Langa puffed another breath, opening his eyes again, gazing up at Reki with his sweet, flushed cheeks and his lopsided dimples and that tiny dent in his bottom lip. "I like your mouth," Langa blurted, without fully meaning to, and Reki choked out another laugh.

"Hah," he said, rubbing the heel of his hand over his face. "Really? You wanna kiss it? You're allowed, you know."

And, oh, Langa's heart was thundering in his chest. "Yes, please," he managed, stretching up, and Reki cupped his face with both of his warm, warm hands, and leaned down to bump their noses together. Lightly he brushed his lips over Langa's, and Langa swallowed back a whimper, because even the slightest touch felt so good, Reki's dry, cracked lips against his own. Slowly Reki pressed closer, mouthing gently against him, rubbing both of his thumbs over Langa's cheeks, and Langa wanted to sob with how *cherished* he felt.

"Good?" Reki whispered, and Langa felt his lips form the word, and he nodded, desperately, and Reki leaned down again, tilting his head so that their mouths slotted together. He smoothed his fingers along Langa's cheekbones, kissing him long and slow, his legs falling to either side of Langa's body so that their hearts pressed together, one solid, heavy heartbeat between them.

"I love you," Langa managed, in between kisses, and Reki laughed a little, and Langa's heart swelled, because it was the sweetest thing in the world, Reki's laugh, the breathless laugh he gave when he was overwhelmed or embarrassed. Maybe he would always laugh when Langa whispered *I love you,* and oh, Langa would whisper it every single day for as long as he could.

“I love you too,” mumbled Reki. He kissed Langa’s mouth again, his thumbs coming up to rub against Langa’s temples, his eyebrows. “Mm. I love kissing you, ah, can I, can I do it some more?”

“Uh-huh,” Langa managed, and Reki hummed softly, leaning in again. This time his mouth slid more easily against Langa’s, his tongue touching Langa’s bottom lip briefly before he settled into a soothing rhythm of kissing and pulling away and dipping down to kiss again and oh, oh, Langa could feel Reki’s heartbeat, the same slow thrum as Langa’s own, as Reki’s hands played with his hair.

“I wanted to do this for so long,” Reki mumbled against him. “Just, I just wanted to take my time kissing you, y’know? Could kiss you, ah, for hours ‘n hours.”

Langa heaved a breath, his eyes hot, because he had wanted the same thing, for so long, to be able to cherish every small kiss and touch, to slow down and appreciate everything about Reki. “Now you can,” he whispered, and Reki kissed the dent in the corner of his mouth, then his cheek, then his lips again. His mouth was impossibly sweet everywhere it touched, and Langa could barely believe he was allowed to feel something so fragile and wonderful as Reki lying on top of him, fingers tangled in his hair, kissing him as if he was precious.

Maybe Langa *was* precious. The thought made his throat swell.

“I love you,” he whispered again, “I love you, I love you,” and Reki whispered it back, his tongue pressing briefly to Langa’s bottom lip, hot and gentle, and Langa parted his lips, his breathing coming more quickly because he wanted Reki to deepen the kiss, he wanted pant into Reki’s mouth, he wanted to feel all the warm tingling feelings Reki always made him feel. Carefully Reki ran his tongue over Langa’s bottom lip again.

“You taught me this,” Reki whispered, and Langa nearly whimpered again, because oh, the way Reki *talked* when they were kissing, whispering his thoughts into Langa’s mouth, his voice scratchy and perfect, it was making Langa’s head fuzzy. “You taught me how to do all of this,” Reki breathed, and then his tongue touched the roof of Langa’s mouth, and Langa moaned, his hands grasping at the blanket, and Reki did it again, long and slow and Langa’s toes curled in his socks, his head sinking deeper into the pillows as he whimpered, and, god. He should be embarrassed, making all these noises, even in the empty apartment, but he couldn’t help himself. The way Reki licked at the corner of his mouth made Langa’s legs feel fuzzy, like he had stood up too fast, but *oh* the feeling was so good.

“You like that,” Reki whispered again, and Langa choked on another groan, trying to find Reki’s arms under the blanket so he could hold onto him. He clung to Reki’s elbows when he found them, the band-aids scratchy under his palms, and Reki kissed his cheeks again, and his chin, so Langa would have a chance to catch his breath.

“I like it,” Langa gasped, and he felt Reki smile against his chin, kissing the underside of his jaw quickly before moving back to Langa’s mouth. His lips were so warm and sweet when they kissed, and Langa made another muffled sound against him, trying to kiss back as best he could, his fingers pressing into the soft skin of Reki’s arms. Clumsily he tried to lick at Reki’s mouth, too, because oh he wanted to feel the sweet touch of Reki’s tongue against his, he wanted to feel Reki panting into his mouth, and he felt Reki’s breath hitch against him, the smallest groan escaping him. Then Reki was pulling away with a few chaste kisses and Langa could barely stop himself from whining.

“Langa,” Reki mumbled, his fingers weaving into Langa’s hair, and Langa was so flushed and desperate and Reki was so close, and Langa wanted to kiss some more, he wanted to kiss until Reki felt as fuzzy and lightheaded as he did, and in his clumsy brain, Langa tried to put together the words to ask. Reki was so good about asking, and Langa wanted to make sure he did the same, he needed to make sure Reki wanted this as badly as Langa did.

“More?” he finally managed to gasp, and he heard the huff of a laugh against his lips as Reki licked at his mouth, barely even a kiss, and oh, Langa was already panting again.

“More, please?” Reki mumbled, and Langa tried not to whimper again, because he knew Reki was teasing, always teasing, tugging gently on Langa’s hair, and he huffed a frustrated breath against Reki’s lips.

“Please,” he said, and then he had a thought, and he squeezed Reki’s arms and managed, “Baby,” and oh, there was the hitch in Reki’s breathing again, the way he ducked his head, pressing his mouth to Langa’s shoulder. He mumbled something that Langa couldn’t hear, and desperately Langa’s squeezed his arms and Reki lifted his head, just an inch, to mumble,

“Can you say that again?”

and, oh, Langa was babbling before he could even process the words, “Reki, baby, my Reki, oh baby,” and Reki made a sound in his throat, almost a moan, and Langa gasped, “my baby,” and then Reki was kissing him again, fierce, his hands tangling deeper in Langa’s hair again and Langa gasped a breath, his cheeks so hot, so hot as Reki’s fingertips dragged over the base of his skull, tilting his head up.

Reki’s tongue was addicting, laving over Langa’s bottom lip, running along the roof of Langa’s mouth, and clumsily Langa tried to use his tongue, too, until Reki’s breathing was stuttered and uneven and his hands were gripping Langa’s hair, their mouths fumbling against each other. Langa thought he might fall apart, under the clinking of their teeth together, but he didn’t, because Reki’s body was solid and real on top of him, holding him together, and when Langa gasped for air again, Reki pulled back, panting,

“You’re so perfect, Langa, Langa,”

and Langa gasped a whimper, tightening his grip on Reki’s arms, and Reki kissed his mouth again, whispering, “I love you” before melting against him.

They kissed for so long that all of Langa’s coherent thoughts fuzzed out, his head full of only Reki, Reki’s hands in his hair, Reki’s thundering pulse, Reki’s hot, sweet mouth pulling away and meeting his own again, over and over. His limbs were lost among the blankets, all his feeling focused on the press of their chest together, the fumbling of their mouths, and Reki’s fingertips, the rough bandaids on his palms. Everything was a warm, warm thrum of *he loves me, I love him, he loves me, I love him I love him oh god I love him.*

Reki sucked his bottom lip into his mouth again, tugging with his teeth in a way that made Langa’s head spin, and then they heard the slide of a key in a lock and Reki scrambled upward, whispering “shit” into the darkness. His weight settled heavily in Langa’s lap and Langa tried to gasp for breath oh god, oh god.

His mom was home.

“Langa?” her voice called, as the front door shut behind her, and Reki shifted, glancing over his shoulder, putting his warm hands on Langa’s stomach. Langa’s breath hitched again, his heart pounding, trying not to focus on the press of Reki’s palms against his t-shirt, and Reki glanced at him again and mouthed, *you okay?*

And, ah, he had no idea. Langa tried to swallow, but his face was so flushed, and when he cleared his throat he could just *hear* how raw and fucked up it was. “I’m here,” he said, except his voice gave out halfway through and he flushed again, and above him, Reki pressed a hand to his mouth to stifle a laugh. Langa glared up at him, his chest heaving for air, and managed to say again, “I’m in here.”

“Okay, baby.” He could hear the thump of her shoes in the entryway. “Don’t forget to pack up your lunch for tomorrow before you go to bed!”

Reki bit hard on his knuckles to keep quiet, his eyes sparkling, as Langa forced out, “Okay.”

God, he sounded absolutely destroyed.

Reki started snickering again as soon as they heard her door close, and weakly Langa punched him in the chest. “Stop,” he said, and Reki’s shoulders shook harder, probably at the way Langa’s scratchy voice cracked in the middle of the word. He punched Reki again, flushing, trying not to focus too hard on the wild, disheveled curls around Reki’s face or the rumpled collar of his t-shirt. Langa cleared his throat again and managed, “It’s your fault.”

Reki pulled his hand away from his mouth, his face glowing, grinning down at Langa. “Hah,” he said, softly, barely above a whisper, the smile so obvious in his voice. “I like the sound of that.”

Langa covered his face, and Reki laughed again, even more softly, and leaned down to kiss his knuckles. He whispered apologies into Langa’s fingers, and finally Langa’s face cooled down just enough for him to move his hands off his burning cheeks, meeting Reki’s lips once, twice, three times.

Then finally Reki rolled his body off of Langa’s, tumbling on his back onto the bed. “Man,” he breathed out, his fingers fumbling to tangle around Langa’s, the blanket with sleeves still wrapped around him. “We were kissing for—what? A long time.”

Langa rubbed his cheeks with his free hand, glancing at the clock. He tried not to flush again at how late it was—they had been kissing for at least an hour, maybe more. God, Reki was addicting. Langa could already feel how many hours of the summer he was going to waste kissing Reki slowly, but he also knew they would be the most blissful hours of his life, so he just cleared his throat again. “Yeah,” he said. “A...a while.”

Reki breathed out again, a half-laugh, and squeezed Langa’s fingers. “You wanna sleep?”

Langa nodded, still struggling to get his breathing and his heartbeat under control, but he made himself sit up. “I need to pee.”

Reki laughed again, and Langa stood up on wobbly legs, heading for the bathroom. He ended up showering, too, because his body was caked with dirt and a little blood from the skatepark, and the warm water was soothing, relaxing his tensed-up limbs. Carefully he toweled off his hair and brushed his teeth and headed back into the bedroom.

He caught Reki tucking the confession letter into the front of his backpack before Reki straightened up, too. He came over to Langa, putting his hands on the clean skin of Langa’s upper arms, and leaned up to peck his mouth. “Can I use your shower, too?” Reki asked, and Langa nodded, his face warm at how casually Reki had kissed him, and then Reki kissed him again, and they stood there for several long minutes, lost in each other all over again.

Finally Reki pulled away with flushed cheeks and a smile, squeezing Langa’s arms before escaping into the bathroom, and Langa toppled onto the bed and breathed in the warm, warm smell of Reki on the sheets.

It took him a long time to move. He heard the shower turn on and then off again, and he knew his mother would realize that Reki had stayed over, but hopefully she would have the grace to ask him about in private. Langa’s limbs felt limp and worn out, but he finally managed to crawl under the blankets, resting his face on the cool pillow, too tired to even lift his head when he heard Reki come quietly out of the bathroom.

“Langa?” Reki whispered, and Langa made a noise, and carefully Reki crawled onto the bed, pulling back the blankets and sliding under. Langa was about to roll over, but then he felt Reki’s hand settle hesitantly on his hip, over Langa’s sweatpants. Langa’s breath stuck in his throat, and then Reki whispered, “Can I, can I hold you?”

Langa tried to swallow, pressing his face into the pillow to stifle the blush. “Uh-huh,” he whispered back, and Reki made a noise in his throat, hastily shuffling closer until his chest pressed to Langa’s front, his arm wrapping around Langa’s stomach, his arm warm and heavy on top of Langa.

Langa let his eyes sink closed as a long breath escaped him, and maybe he made some kind of sound, too, because Reki squirmed against him, squeezing him more tightly. Langa’s brain fuzzed out again, in the sweetest way, his head lulling back against the pillows, Reki’s feet tucking in between his ankles. He felt his mouth tugging into a smile as Reki’s mouth pressed, warm and wet, to the back of his neck, the same place he had kissed the first time they spooned like this. Reki’s voice was scratchy and perfect when he whispered, “G’night, baby.”

Goodnight, Langa said back, although only in his head, because he was already asleep, *goodnight, Reki, my Reki, my love.*

“How do I look?” asked Reki, turning around at the front of the schoolgates, flipping his skateboard up into his hand.

Langa gazed at him. Reki’s wild, vibrant hair was pushed off his forehead with his blue headband, and his red cheeks burned bright under the morning sun, and his uniform shirt was slightly wrinkled from the wild tumble he had taken on the ride over. There was a fierce look of confidence in his eyes, and the eyeliner he was wearing was slightly uneven, smudged just a little on the left side, but everything about it was so *Reki* that Langa’s chest felt tight and full.

He squeezed Reki’s fingers, trying to come up with the right words. Even though Reki had kissed him good morning three different times earlier, laughing against his mouth, it was still hard to believe that someone so beautiful wanted to be his boyfriend, and Langa wasn’t sure he would ever have the words to express that.

So he just said, “You look amazing,” and he meant it. He squeezed Reki’s hand again. “You’re amazing, Reki.”

That morning, after Langa had whispered, *"Do you still like me?"* and Reki had kissed all the doubts away, they had stumbled into the kitchen to find Langa's mom brewing coffee. She gave Langa a raised-eyebrows look that made him flush down to his chest, and he stumbled through some excuse about needing to get ready for school, and it was only then that he found the eyeliner tube in his crumpled uniform pants, thrown hastily onto the floor of his bedroom.

Reki's eyes had gone so big when he cradled the eyeliner in his hands. He hadn't said anything, speechless for maybe the first time ever, but he had hugged Langa tightly, as if trying to express how much the gift meant to him. Then he had sat at the kitchen table with his hands clasped in his lap, allowing Langa's mother to paint black lines carefully across his eyelids.

Reki squeezed his hand again, and Langa jumped off his skateboard, tucking it under his arm. Around them, their classmates were heading through the gates, chattering about exams and summer and rumors, and as a girl passed, Langa caught the sound of his own name, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered. Langa tightened his grip on Reki's fingers, gesturing to their clasped hands, and asked quietly, "Is this okay?"

They hadn't talked about being out at school yet. But Reki nodded, the fierce look glinting in his eyes and said, "It's more than okay."

Langa took a deep breath and nodded, too. With Reki's hand in his, he thought, he didn't need to be afraid of anything. Let people laugh at their chipped nail polish, or yell mockingly at them across the courtyard; Langa wasn't afraid of them, and he wasn't afraid of being left alone, at least not right now, not in the hot sun and the laughter around them and Reki's warm, sweaty palm pressed to his.

The fear would come again, Langa knew. But maybe Reki would be here with him when it did.

They pressed their shoulders together and headed through the school gates. A drop of sweat rolled down Langa's back, but he held his shoulders back, his eyes gazing straight ahead, and Reki's thumb rubbed across his knuckles, tight and determined. The courtyard sprawled wide

and crowded around them, the cobblestones hot under their shoes, and as they approached the steps, Langa could see a flash of red lipstick out of the corner of his eye.

He could feel the stares of the group of girls on him, on the side of his face, on his hand clasped in Reki's, but he didn't look at them. He knew the girls were whispering about him, about Reki, and he hoped Reki wouldn't listen to them, he hoped Reki never heard another word they said.

Together they climbed the steps, and Reki said, low, "If anyone tries to give you shit—" and hastily Langa said,

"If anyone tries to give *you* shit—"

Reki laughed, squeezing his hand again, and shouldered open the door, turning his head to grin at Langa. Langa's heart thumped, because the eyeliner somehow made the crinkle of Reki's eyes look more mischievous. "What? What'll you do?" Reki asked, his tongue in his cheek. "Tell them I'm perfect?"

Langa's heart thumped again, his face going pink. He was still embarrassed about shouting that at Nanami, but it was true, so he just said, "Yes," and squeezed Reki's fingers again. Reki laughed, shaking his head, his hair flopping around his face.

"Love you," he said, quiet and affectionate, and they turned the corner into another hallway, the sunshine bright on the tile floors. Among the crowds of students, Langa suddenly spotted a long, trailing hairbow, and oh, Yua. He remembered Yua and her dented heart box, abandoned on the ground, and he swallowed quickly.

"Reki," he said, trying to gesture discreetly to where Yua was standing at her locker, peeling photos off the inside of the door. Reki followed his gaze, his eyebrows going up in understanding, and they squeezed hands one last time before letting go. Langa wiped his sweaty palm on his uniform pants. It wouldn't be fair to hold hands in front of Yua, so soon after her confession; she didn't deserve that. Maybe Reki could tell Yua about Langa some other time, if she wanted to stay friends, but not today.

They wiggled through the crowded hallway, and Yua turned slightly, spotting them. She smiled, lifting her hand in a hesitant wave, and Reki waved back, with his whole arm the way he always did. “Hi, Yua.”

“Hi, Reki,” she said, tucking her hair back. She glanced at Langa with something shy in her eyes, like she still wasn’t sure exactly what to make of him. “Hi, Langa-kun.”

“Just Langa is okay,” he said, fumbling a little with the words, and Reki nudged their feet together, snickering to himself. Langa’s face felt warm, and Yua glanced between them, smiling hesitantly again.

“Langa,” she said, and Langa gave her a clumsy smile back, as Reki leaned against the lockers. It was hard to believe she was the same person who had stood in front of him in that courtyard, a storm raging behind her. She had seemed larger than life on that day; today she was just a girl, a girl with a crooked uniform bow and uneven bangs and a single ear piercing in one ear, the other covered with a band-aid.

“What are you doing?” asked Reki, pointing to the pile of photos in her hands, the tape still clinging to the inside of her locker. Yua glanced down at the photos, holding them up.

“Well, it’s the end of the year,” she said. “So I wanted to clean out my locker. I might throw some of these away, though.” She scratched one of her ankles with her foot, giving an awkward sort of laugh. “I’m sort of upset with some of my friends right now. You know.”

She glanced up at them, and Langa’s chest ached a little, at the hesitant look in her eyes. It was such a familiar look, one he had seen in the mirror so many times, during early mornings in Canada as he brushed his teeth for school. He had the strange thought again, that they shared the same feelings, except these feelings weren’t about Reki. They were about being unwanted, about being left alone, whispered about by your classmates, and the fear of misunderstanding how much boys liked you, of ruining everything.

Maybe they were more alike than he had thought.

“Aw, I’m sorry,” Reki said, pulling a sympathetic face. The chatter around them swelled and then died away again, with the ebb and flow of their classmates walking through the hallway, and Langa had a sudden thought. Before he could stop himself, he was saying,

“You can eat lunch with me and Reki, if you want to,” because Reki had said he wanted to stay friends, and maybe Langa could be friends with her, too, if she wanted. It would probably be good for him to have more friends.

Yua smiled, shyly. She nodded, her soft eyes crinkling at the edges, her hands easing on the photos. “I’d like that,” she said, and Langa felt a knot in his stomach relax, once he hadn’t known existed until now.

Over lunch Langa learned a lot of new things about Yua. He learned that she liked to sit cross-legged just like Reki, and that her parents worked too often to cook much, so she always ate prepackaged food at school. He learned that she liked bringing her niece to playgrounds, and that she liked to paint in watercolor, and that she loved plants, although she could never quite manage to keep them alive.

He learned that it wasn’t so bad to share his lunch with Reki with somebody else, at least not once in a while.

“So you’re ditching what’s her name,” asked Reki, stealing food out of Langa’s bento with his chopsticks, clearly under the impression that he was being sneaky. “Nanami? You guys have been friends since grade school.”

Yua sighed a little, rubbing her knee, looking down at the concrete of the roof between them. Langa briefly wondered what it would be like to be friends with somebody that long, to live in the same place your whole life, and then Yua said, “Yes, yeah, I actually...Reki, I wanted to apologize for her, I…”

Reki waved his chopsticks, accidentally flinging rice onto Langa’s collar, and said, “Aw, you don’t have,” but Yua interrupted him, saying,

“I want to! Because, because I know why she flipped out like that.” She smoothed the edges of her skirt down, the warm wind playing with the ends of her hair, and made a face. “We were actually, we went out with each other for a few months, over the summer. I thought we could keep on being friends after it was over, you know, because we were friends before. But I guess she still thinks it’s her job to be protective over me, even though I told her to stop.” She took a breath. “I just want to start over, you know? But I’m worried that….that no other friend groups will want me.”

Her hair blew around her face again, the pretty blue sky bright and endless behind her, and Langa’s chest ached as she clumsily tried to pull the hair out of her mouth. Langa glanced sideways at Reki, and Reki glanced sideways at him, and then Reki put his feet on top of his board, sliding it along the roof until it bumped against Langa’s legs, a silent question. Langa remembered being friendless and alone and stuck in his own head, and then finding Reki, finding skating and late-afternoon train rides and vending machine sodas and the rush of adrenaline when they raced up the halfpipe together, boards twisting in midair, caught among the sunlight and the wind and the sky.

Everybody deserved a chance to feel alive like that.

“Yua,” said Reki, sliding the board back to himself. “Would you ever wanna learn how to skate?”

Probably Langa failed each and every one of his final exams, because he and Reki spent so much time lying horizontal in the sunpatch on Reki’s bed, making out, hands roaming over each other’s sides, and very little time actually studying the books strewn around them. But finals season had sailed by, and now Langa was standing with his mother on the Kyan doorstep, tugging at the uncomfortable collar of his button-up shirt.

Langa’s mom rang the doorbell, and seconds later the door screeched open and Reki’s head popped out. “Hi, Langa’s mom,” he said, grinning, and Langa frowned at him, even as his mom laughed lightly.

“I told you not to call her that,” he said, and Reki gave him a cheeky smile, sticking out his tongue through his teeth. Langa’s cheeks went traitorously warm, and he frowned harder.

“Nice plaid,” said Reki, snickering as he opened the door wider, stepping aside to let Langa’s mom inside. Langa tugged on the collar of his shirt again, trying to kick Reki as he climbed over the threshold, but Reki hopped out of the way too quickly.

“My mom made me wear it,” Langa muttered, his face still warm. “Don’t make fun of me.”

Reki snickered again, sliding the door shut, pressing his bare shoulder to Langa’s, warm and pretty in his sleeveless yellow hoodie. “It’s kinda cute,” Reki said, and Langa’s neck flushed, and hastily he tried to elbow Reki.

“Stop,” he said again, and Reki laughed, wiggling around him and leaning in to kiss Langa’s cheek. Langa’s face burned where his lips touched, even though both of their moms had their backs turned, chatting about the banana bread Langa’s mom had brought. To get even, Langa grabbed Reki’s arm and kissed his forehead, underneath his headband.

Reki laughed again, his cheeks flushed, nudging their shoulders together again. “Aw,” he said. “You’re gonna make me blush.”

“You’re already blushing,” Langa said, nudging back, and Reki’s laugh was a little more breathless this time, his ears pink. He was so pretty in the sunny entryway that Langa’s hands itched to cup his face and kiss him silly, but of course he couldn’t do that, because they had come over to have brunch with Reki’s family, and their mothers were *right* there.

Langa’s mom hadn’t seemed surprised when Langa finally worked up the courage to tell her that he and Reki had started dating. She had hugged him and smoothed his hair back and asked lots of questions, mostly about the night she had found him sobbing over the stupid sunflowers, but Langa managed to answer all the questions without breaking into a nervous sweat. A few days later, Reki had told his own mom, re-enacting the ordeal for Langa in his bedroom, with lots of exaggerated groans and wild arm movements. Apparently there had been a lot of hugging and showering him with kisses and saying embarrassing stuff like, *“My baby is all grown up.”*

And now brunch, which was equally embarrassing, especially since their moms were laughing together over a photo of baby Reki like they were best friends. “Let’s grab the food from the kitchen,” Reki said, grabbing Langa’s hand and tugging him through the house. “I’ll sneak you an extra pastry.”

Langa squeezed his fingers, still overwhelmingly warm at the press of Reki’s palm against his own. They had only been dating for a week and a half, but holding Reki’s hand still made Langa’s stomach feel full of butterflies, his heart swelling with something nervous and giddy, and when they reached the kitchen, he managed to steal another quick kiss before Reki’s younger sisters came running into the room.

And maybe that had been a mistake, because then Langa felt rosy and warm all throughout brunch, his mouth tingling with the feeling of Reki’s lips, the taste of the chapstick that Langa had given him from his secret stash of presents. The Kyan’s kitchen table was small and crowded, and Reki’s thigh pressed against Langa’s the whole meal as he tried to talk more loudly than his sisters, insisting that Sketchy was *not* a dog, he was a *fennec fox,* and *shut up, stop, it’s my turn to talk now!* Langa pressed closer as subtly as he could, because Reki’s agitated hand-waving made his chest feel all fuzzy and affectionate, and god, Reki was so cute, wasn’t he? He was the cutest boy in the world, and he was Langa’s boyfriend, and Langa felt indescribably happy, sitting next to him, surrounded by the people they loved.

He leaned against Reki as subtly as he could, and Reki turned to him, holding a forkful of waffle. “Try this?” Reki said, and Langa opened his mouth, biting off the waffle, and Reki made a pleased sort of sound in his throat as Langa chewed and swallowed.

“It’s good,” he said, and nudged the side of his hand against Reki’s under the table.

No one was watching them, they were all laughing at a mess one of the twins had made with her pancakes, so Reki turned his palm over and wrapped his fingers around Langa’s. Langa’s heart pressed, contented and warm, against his ribs, and he knew the smile he gave Reki was soft and sappy, but Reki just smiled back, no teasing in his voice when he said, too quietly for anyone else to hear,

“Love you, Langa,”

and Langa glowed with pride, with happiness, with love.

“I love you, too,” he whispered.

He wanted to say more, but then he heard his mom saying from across the table, “What are you boys whispering about?” She tossed a crumpled up napkin at Langa’s face, and Langa scrunched up his nose as it bounced off his cheek, and the girls all laughed. Then Reki laughed too, and Langa flushed and kicked him under the table.

“Traitor,” he mumbled.

Reki’s mom shook her head, smiling. “Reki’s probably telling him about one of his little comic book collections,” she said, knowingly, to Langa’s mom, and Reki’s ears went red.

“They’re not comic books!” he said. “They’re skating magazines—stop laughing!” to his sisters, and then everyone was laughing, including Langa, squeezing Reki’s fingers under the table, and Reki pretended to grumble, sticking his fork back into his waffle and shoving another piece clumsily against Langa’s lips.

In the end, there was syrup everywhere.

The sun was high overhead when Langa and Reki finally managed to escape into his bedroom, sliding the door shut behind them, the shouts of children playing outside coming through the open window. Reki tumbled onto his bed as Langa picked his way through Reki’s cluttered magazines, which he was in the middle of organizing, and then Reki popped up again with his hair ruffled, grinning.

“Langa,” he said, and Langa swallowed, at the sing-song way Reki said the syllables. Reki had never mispronounced Langa’s name, not even when they first met.

“Yeah?”

Reki reached out and grabbed his hand, tugging him closer, until Langa stood in between his knees with Reki's head tipped back, grinning up at him, his tongue pressed to the gap between his front teeth. Langa felt his cheeks warm, itching in the hot summer air, and then Reki said, "You said this was uncomfortable, right?" and tugged gently on the edge of Langa's button-down.

Langa wanted to bury his face in his hands. Reki could be so unabashed about things he wanted, even if those things were kind of embarrassing, like the time he insisted they swap checks and buy each other dinner at Joe's restaurant, or the time he made Langa wear matching socks with him, which he claimed was a "romantic gift" for their "one week anniversary. "You just want me to take it off, don't you?"

"Oh, no," said Reki, innocently, "I just want you to be comfortable! But whatever floats your boat, my man."

He released Langa's shirt, leaning backward on his wrists, but Langa could see the hopeful curve of his smile, so clumsily he unbuttoned the stiff plaid shirt and slid it off, standing in the sunshine wearing only his black tank-top. "You're a liar," Langa told Reki, and Reki grinned again, poking his tongue into his cheek.

"Yeah, but I'm *your* liar," he said, making grabby hands for him. Langa climbed onto the bed on his knees and collapsed onto his back, and Reki flopped down next to him, and for a minute they just looked at each other across the mattress. Reki's face was red and freckled and peeling in the sun, and his eyes were so soft and sappy, and Langa knew his own face looked the same, but he didn't care, he didn't care because there was no one there to see except Reki.

"My Reki," said Langa, after a long minute, and Reki laughed, flushing, rolling over onto his side to face him.

"Stop," he said, but he was grinning so hard that Langa could see the dents of his dimples, and he smiled back dopily, so happy he thought he would melt with the feelings, a mushy puddle of love and affection on top of Reki's comforter, where this had all began.

“Baby,” said Langa, just because he could, and because he loved the way Reki laughed, the sound low and flustered, and rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand.

“That’s cheating,” Reki said, kicking at Langa’s feet lazily, and then leaving his toes pressed to Langa’s shins.

“Oh, sorry,” said Langa, his heart thumping pleasantly in his chest, “I didn’t know this was a game. Or, wait—are we still practicing something?”

Reki laughed again, pressing his hand over Langa’s face, his sweaty palm smushing against Langa’s mouth. “Cut it out! You agreed to the practicing.”

“It was your idea,” mumbled Langa, his lips still sticky with the syrup from earlier, pressing against Reki’s palm.

Reki took his hand back and said, “Yeah, but you liked it.”

His face was so pretty and warm, his cheeks soft and round with the smile, and Langa could feel himself smiling back. “I liked it,” he agreed, and Reki laughed, still flushed.

He scooted closer on the mattress, sliding his hand against Langa’s neck, his skin hot from the stifling summer heat, and said, “Hang on, I think you still have syrup on you.” He bumped his knees against Langa’s, their bodies curled in toward each other, and when he grinned again, his eyes were sparkling and golden and Langa’s heart thumped again, giddy. “You want help with that?”

Langa’s cheeks warmed, because he knew what Reki was asking for, and also knew he could tease him more, but he didn’t want to. “Yes, please,” he said, and Reki did his breathless laughing thing and leaned closer, licking at Langa’s bottom lip, and Langa let out a quick breath and then Reki kissed him, soft and slow.

Langa let his eyes sink closed, the sun streaming in through the windows, hot on his skin. Reki's fingers slipped into Langa's hair, lifting it off his sweaty neck, and Langa shifted against him, sighing a little. Reki's mouth tasted like waffles and peaches, and his chapstick rubbed onto Langa's sticky lips as Reki kissed him. Everything smelled like sweet grass and sunshine, and Langa put his hand on Reki's elbow, and then slid it to his bicep, squeezing at the soft muscle there until Reki made a satisfied sound against him.

"Langa," Reki mumbled, his feet bumping Langa's legs again, sucking a little on Langa's bottom lip, "do that again?"

"Mm," said Langa, kissing back, squeezing Reki's bicep again, and Reki squirmed on the mattress, his breath quickening. Langa tried to stifle a smile, but he couldn't, because his insides were turning to goo, warm and mushy. He loved this. He loved finding new ways to make Reki feel good, compliments that made Reki's chest puff up with pride, ticklish spots that made him laugh and laugh, sensitive places on his neck that made him warm and tingly, soft whispered words that made him blush late at night, when the cicadas were humming through the window just quietly enough to be romantic.

Reki flexed his muscle under Langa's fingertips, and Langa moaned softly into his mouth, and Reki heaved a quick, gasping breath, pulling away. "Langa," he whispered, throat scratchy, and then, when Langa did it again, rubbing his thumb against the skin there, Reki groaned quietly. "Geez. Fuck. *Langa.* "

"Baby," Langa agreed, his voice hoarse, and Reki tipped his head forward again with an even quieter groan, latching onto Langa's mouth. They kissed some more, Reki's hands tangling even deeper in Langa's hair, and Langa's brain was a pleasant lull of *baby* and *Reki my Reki* and *kiss, we can kiss all we want.* The sounds of laughter swam in through the windows, and finally they fell apart again, both of their mouths sticky with the syrup, chapstick smeared around the corners of Langa's lips.

"It's so good," Reki said, breathless, and Langa laughed a little, pressing his cheek to the mattress, and nodded. It was good. Everything was good. The summer day stretched out, like an endless, precious gift just for them, and outside Reki's mom was shouting at the girls to *be careful!* It was the kind of moment Langa wanted to remember forever, to cherish, and he smiled at Reki and felt warm all over when Reki smiled back.

He found Reki's other hand on top of the blankets, and Reki's body sagged with a soft sigh of relief as their fingers tangled together. Langa's heart gave a pleasant squirm at the pretty flush of Reki's kiss-swollen lips, the secret, lovedrunk smile only Langa ever got to see.

"I like you," Langa whispered, just to see Reki's eyes crinkle up in the smile. "Did you know?"

Reki huffed out a laugh, his cheeks warm. "Yeah, I guess I had my suspicions."

Langa squeezed his hand, and Reki squeezed back, and then they both laughed a little. For a while they lay there in the sun, content, just gazing at each other with stupid smiles on their faces, and Langa tried to count Reki's freckles, but he gave up at thirty-seven. Langa had never been very good with numbers anyway, and the freckles came and went with the seasons, anyway; Langa only knew he loved every single one of them.

A gust of hot wind fluttered the skating posters taped to Reki's walls, and Langa nudged his toes against Reki's shin, feeling the soft tickle of his leg hair. "Can I ask you something?" he said. Reki nodded, pressing their feet together, and Langa asked, "When did you start liking me?"

Reki made a thoughtful humming sound, poking his tongue into his cheek again. "I think I always liked you," he said, and Langa was about to say that wasn't an answer, because he was selfish and he wanted an answer, but then Reki continued, "I liked that you loved skating as much as me. And I always thought it was amazing to watch you race, and even when we were just doing tricks around the skatepark. I don't know. I felt like I understood you, and you understood me, and I never felt that way with anybody before."

Langa's toes curled, warm, and he pushed them against the blankets. "Really?"

Reki nodded. "Uh-huh. And I kept thinking that we made sense together. Like we fit. You always listened to me talk, and then you started talking more, too, and I liked hearing all your thoughts and stuff, even when you asked me embarrassing questions about feelings and stuff. And we figured out how to help each other when we get freaked out by something, and I think that's kinda cool, y'know?" He grinned, a bit hopefully, and Langa smiled back, nodding, his cheeks warm. "And when we started the kissing thing, I just, I finally

understood what they meant by the butterflies in your stomach. Hah. That sounds really corny, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does," said Langa, squeezing his hand, and then confessed, "But I get the butterflies, too."

The smile Reki gave him must have been brighter than the sun itself.

"I like that," Reki said. He rubbed his thumb over Langa's knuckles, shifting a little. "I tried to deny it to myself at first. 'Cause, like. I thought you were outta my league, and just kissing me out of pity, and stuff like that. I was afraid to like you, 'cause nobody ever liked me back, you know? You were my first kiss. I always thought nobody wanted to kiss me 'cause I was, like, unlikable, somehow."

"You're not," said Langa, lifting their clasped hands clumsily, and Reki's eyes crinkled at the corners again as he watched Langa kiss his scraped-up knuckles. They tasted like syrup, somehow, too. "You're extremely likable."

Reki laughed, a little, rubbing his red cheek. "Well, I appreciate you thinking that."

"I do," said Langa, squeezing his palm. "I definitely do."

Reki smiled, and then he leaned forward and kissed him again, and Langa melted into him easily, their lips moving softly against each other, as if whispering feelings they didn't have words for. And, ah, Langa thought fuzzily, this was the exact spot where he had kissed Reki for the first time, wasn't it? He had been Reki's first kiss. The thought made him feel squirmy and warm inside, somehow, even though Reki had been self-conscious about it for so long.

It was almost funny, if Langa thought about it too much. All along, Reki had been nervous about his lack of kissing experience, and Langa had been nervous about his one *bad* kissing experience, and now here they were, kissing each other like it was the most natural thing in the world. For some reason it made sense, just like Reki had said. They made sense.

“I love you,” Langa whispered, against Reki’s mouth. Reki laughed, kissing him again, and then again, and then again before whispering, “I love you,” back, and Langa was warm to his toes. The summer was just beginning, he thought happily, his eyes sinking closed as their mouths pressed together again, and he and Reki were just beginning, too. His heart thrilled quietly in his chest. He had been Reki’s first kiss, and maybe someday he could be Reki’s last kiss, too, and maybe, just maybe, he could be every single beautiful kiss in between.

Chapter End Notes

hello hello! please check out some of the beautiful art from this week <3

spacedruid on instagram
chocogummiesx on tumblr
.kuro._nekoart on instagram
thatshortenby on tumblr

and here are my doodles for chapter 17 !!! thank you again for all of your love. until next time~

epilogue

Chapter Notes

one last huge thank you, if you have stuck with me until the very end <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

epilogue

one month later

Langa awoke, slowly and blearily, to a mouthful of Reki's hair. He screwed up his face, trying to push the hair away with his tongue, warm under all of the covers with Reki's back snug against his chest. He rubbed his mouth on the pillow and then buried it in Reki's shoulder instead, squeezing his eyes shut against the light bleeding through his curtains, and Reki mumbled something in his sleep, something that sounded like *"baby."*

Langa's face felt even warmer. He snuggled closer, burying his mouth more deeply in Reki's shoulder and breathing him in, sighing at how good Reki smelled. He smelled like *Langa,* like Langa's home, nestled close to Langa's heart in one of his old t-shirts, mumbling incoherently against Langa's pillows.

Langa snuggled closer, cozy and content. He was home.

"Baby," he mumbled against the warm, warm skin of Reki's neck, hugging Reki's waist, and Reki shifted closer, breathing a soft noise into the gentle morning. Underneath the blankets, his scabbed heels pressed to Langa's shins, and Langa felt himself smile, the curve of his mouth hidden in the worn fabric of Reki's t-shirt.

They lay there for a while, breathing together, and Langa kept his eyes closed, quietly marvelling at all the tiny moments of Reki waking up: the way Reki's feet stretched out, scrabbling against the sheets, the way Reki shifted closer to Langa's chest, his shirt twisting around him, the way Reki covered his mouth to stifle his garbled yawn. "Good morning," Langa whispered against him, and Reki's voice was scratchy when he said,

“Mornin’, baby,”

and Langa buried his smile deeper in Reki’s shoulder, as Reki yawned again, relaxing against Langa on the exhale. He squirmed a little, getting comfortable, and Langa felt warm inside, knowing that Reki was so, so comfortable with him, calling him *baby* with his brain still half-asleep, settling against him so easily, as if Langa’s arms were his safe place.

The day still felt fragile, with how early it was, and Langa brushed his lips carefully against Reki’s neck, whispering, “Yeah?” Reki made a throaty humming sound of affirmation, so Langa kissed him there, slowly, his mouth wet and gentle against Reki’s skin. His palms felt warm, one hugging Reki’s soft waist, the other trapped under the pillows, and he could feel Reki’s pulse thrumming under his lips, slow and sleepy.

He kissed the edge of Reki’s jaw, and Reki tilted his head up, giving him room, and Langa savored the prickly feeling of Reki’s facial hair growing in, a new addition to the jumble of things Langa had discovered about him.

He loved every single one of them.

Langa nibbled softly at Reki’s jaw, and Reki huffed a laugh, squeezing Langa’s hand. He tasted like sweat, his face creased from the pillowcase, and Langa kissed his cheek and the faded dent of his dimple, one of his favorite places to kiss. And then Reki turned his head and kissed the corner of his mouth, still warm with sleep.

“Baby,” he mumbled against Langa, and Langa laughed again, smothering the sound by kissing him again, and Reki made this satisfied sound in his throat, shifting on the lumpy mattress, turning his body so he could kiss more easily, and they lost themselves in each other for a while, the sun creeping up behind the broken blinds of Langa’s bedroom.

“You taste like sleep,” Langa whispered against him, and he felt Reki’s mouth curve up, even as Reki clumsily pushed at his chest.

“Yeah, well, last night you tasted like garlic,” Reki said, and Langa was startled into laughing, his neck flushing.

“You bought me that pizza,” he protested, his voice still raspy from waking up, and from the smile itching his cheeks. He felt a little embarrassed, but mostly he just felt warm, because Reki had wanted to kiss him anyway, hadn’t he? Reki had kissed him so much last night that Langa’s head had gone dizzy, his hands helpless and forgotten on the couch cushions beside him, his mind full of only Reki, Reki’s hands on his face, Reki’s weight against his thighs. Reki had kissed him until he stopped thinking, until he stopped worrying, the world falling away for a moment, blurring pleasantly into something close to heaven.

The world had returned, of course, when Reki pulled away; but it was a beautiful world, wasn’t it? Reki was laughing against his sleep-heavy chest, kissing the corner of Langa’s mouth again, and Langa had never woken up smiling as much as today.

“I love you,” he said, and Reki laughed again, that breathless catch in his throat, and Langa squirmed closer to him under the blankets, his heart full with the way Reki still laughed almost every time Langa said *I love you,* always embarrassed by the words. Reki grinned at him, his cheeks flushed, and said,

“I love you too.” He leaned in, kissing Langa’s chin, then his jaw. “Mm. It’s a big day, huh? You ready for it?”

Langa’s chest thumped, once, but he nodded. “You’re the one who’s not ready,” he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt, and it must have worked, because Reki laughed again, trailing his fingers up Langa’s arm and smoothing his thumb over Langa’s cheek, tucking his hair carefully behind his ears. He grinned up at Langa, his tongue caught between his teeth, and Langa remembered to breathe, he remembered to breathe out and then carefully in again, and his limbs relaxed, marginally, against the mattress again.

The truth was that he was nervous, just a little. He had spent weeks trying to plan the perfect date for Reki, the way Reki had planned the perfect date for him, the carnival and the ocean and the hotel room, all of the beautiful memories captured in the photobooth pictures. Langa had found an onsen and everything, the most gorgeous place, but only two days ago the place had called him to apologize, saying that the reservation had to be cancelled due to bad weather.

Langa was a bit ashamed of how well he had taken the news—which was to say, not well at all. He had spent at least an hour lying in bed, the blankets dragged over his head, anguishing, before his mother had come in to bring him to therapy, where Langa had sat with his arms hugging himself, refusing to talk about it. “I wanted everything to be perfect,” he had finally gotten out, because he had been so anxious about making everything perfect, so wonderful for Reki, who deserved the best date in the whole world.

It had taken a lot of coaxing to talk him down, but Langa had left the office with a couple fewer knots in his chest, and that night Reki had invited him over to play video games and eat cheesy chips, and the knots had relaxed further, at the way Reki laughed and rubbed his orange fingers all over Langa’s button-down, staining it. Langa’s palms had still been sweaty and a little trembly when he tackled Reki, tickling him in revenge, and Reki had laughed until he accidentally kneed Langa between the legs, and they had both toppled off the couch, yelping. The night had been imperfect and silly and sort of wonderful, and Reki had kissed him for a long time in his bed, his arm slung over Langa’s body, fingers still twitching with his excess energy even as Langa drifted off to sleep.

So Langa knew this day would be good, because he was spending it with Reki, bad weather or no weather. The storms would come, and he would have to learn to live with them anyway, no matter how unpredictable they were.

Reki ruffled his hair and kissed him again, before yawning and pushing himself up into a sitting position, stretching. His t-shirt rode up over his stomach, and he scratched his side, grinning lazily down at Langa. “We’re still wearing the matching shirts, right?”

Langa swallowed, tearing his eyes away from the crease of Reki’s stomach, the place he had kissed now, so many times, always with something hot and tight burning in his chest. “Yes,” he said, and Reki gave him a cheeky smile and finger guns, cocking them in the way that always made Langa laugh when he was feeling uncertain, and Langa grinned, rubbing his elbow as he sat up, too.

“It’s good,” said Reki, “‘cause you always look better in the clothes *I* pick out for you. No offense!” He poked Langa’s nose and then scrambled off the bed, hurrying for the closet, and Langa shoved his feet into his slippers and stood up. He hadn’t told Reki what they were doing for their date, partly because he still had no idea, himself, but he tried to tell himself it would be okay as he reached for the bedside table, groping for his glasses. The glasses were

uncomfortable, and they made him squint, but the doctor said he needed them; apparently only being able to see “big shapes” wasn’t considered good vision. When he got anxious he still had trouble seeing clearly, but the glasses did help with the blurriness, and for that, at least, Langa was grateful.

“Hang on, I’m gonna try mine on right now,” Reki said, snagging his shirt off the hanger, half-tearing his sleep shirt over his head. Langa snuck over to him before he had a chance to change, dropping a quick kiss on Reki’s freckled shoulder, and Reki laughed appreciatively, pressing back against him as he fumbled to get his arms through the sleeves.

“Is it dry?” Langa wondered, touching the fabric of the colorful shirt gingerly, surprised to find it soft and warm. They had tie-dyed the shirts yesterday in Reki’s front yard, getting more paint on themselves than on the fabric, and the colors were sort of blotchy, bleeding together funny, but Reki wrestled the shirt over his head, and the sight of it still made Langa’s throat dry. “Oh,” he said, a bit dumbly, as Reki turned around, straightening the hem. “Oh, um.”

“Good?” asked Reki, grinning, and Langa swallowed, nodding, trying not to stare at the way the shirt fell just above Reki’s navel, leaving his appendix scar exposed, the hair above the hem of his shorts soft and thick. Reki laughed again, nudging their toes together, and Langa flushed, rubbing his hands on his pajama pants. A couple weeks ago, Reki had confessed that he had worn that sunshine crop top *hoping* that Langa would stare, and Langa had been so embarrassed that he had to bury his face in Reki’s chest for a long, long time. God. No matter how often he was allowed to look at Reki, Langa didn’t think he would ever stop being flustered by him.

“I like it,” Langa croaked, and Reki laughed, leaning in to kiss his chin again, bumping his nose against the clunky frames of Langa’s glasses.

“I knew you would,” he said, affection thick in his voice, and then he grabbed Langa’s matching tie-dye shirt, stuffing it into his hands. “Your turn!”

Langa swallowed again, feeling his ears go warm at the way Reki just *stood* there, grinning expectantly, waiting for Langa to change. He knew he could turn around if he wanted to, and Reki would give him his privacy, but he didn’t want to, he wanted Reki to continue looking at him. So he unbuttoned his pajama shirt clumsily and slid it over his shoulders, leaning into

the touch when Reki reached for him, and they kissed again with Reki's palm warm against Langa's side, comfortable and safe on the curve of his waist.

They finished changing quickly, finding clothes in drawers and backpacks, and Langa struggled to hop into his shorts while Reki stood in the bathroom, drawing on his eyeliner, sticking his tongue between his teeth in concentration. Langa had been too embarrassed to crop his own t-shirt, but he liked the shorts his mom had bought him, these red ones with the hems rolled up. Clumsily he pulled his hair back, making faces at himself in the mirror, and then grabbed something from his nightstand before hurrying into the bathroom to be with Reki.

"Hello, my love," Reki said, turning his head to kiss Langa again, and Langa made a sound that was far too close to a squeak for his liking, his face burning when Reki laughed. Langa jabbed him in the stomach, his ears hot.

"Stop," he said.

"But your face!" said Reki, and then he leaned in again, and Langa swallowed and met him halfway, his palms still sweaty from the pet name. It was one Reki had been teasing him with for the last week or so, whispering *my love* over his shoulder when Langa was making waffles, or mumbling it against his neck when he was lying on top of him, the smile stifled in Langa's skin, listening eagerly for the hitch in Langa's breathing, and *every* time the words made Langa's heart stutter, his face red. He had been trying to get up the courage to mumble it back, *Reki, my love,* and maybe today he finally would.

Reki made him feel bold.

"What's that?" asked Reki, squeezing his wrist and jerking his chin down questioningly, and Langa glanced at his hands.

"Oh," he said, a little dazed. He had forgotten about the little box clasped in his sweaty hands, one of the edges dented a little from being shoved in his drawer for so long. He straightened his shirt and held it out, hesitantly, glancing back up at Reki. "It's for you. Something I...I made."

“You made something for me?” Reki took the gift carefully, looking in Langa’s eyes, a smile beginning to tug at his mouth again. Langa nodded, rubbing his hands on his shorts again, the familiar nerves sticking in his chest again (*what if Reki doesn’t like it*) but the nerves weren’t as bad as they used to be. Reki would like the gift; Langa knew he would, and the certainty sat clear at the back of his mind, even as his anxiety sent other thoughts spiraling around it.

“I’m not very good at making stuff,” Langa said, tripping over the words a little, “but my mom helped.”

Reki grinned again. He made a quick “ah!” sound, and then pulled out one of the bracelets, the red and blue braided threads bright against his palm. “Aw, man,” he said, his cheeks flushing warm, rubbing his mouth. “You didn’t have to. Are they—are they matching?”

Langa nodded, his face pink, his hands clenching and then unclenching. “One for you and one for me?”

Reki looked up at him again, grinning, looking sort of flustered but mostly excited, and then he crushing Langa in a hug. Langa made a soft *oof* sound as Reki squeezed him, thumping one hand against Langa’s back, and then Reki was pulling back, grabbing the other bracelet and shoving the little box onto Langa’s messy countertop.

“Can we put them on now?” asked Reki, and Langa swallowed and nodded. He held out his wrist, his arm decorated with a variety of Reki’s colorful band-aids because of a bad fall he had taken the other day, and carefully Reki slid the bracelet over his hand, knotting it tightly.

“Let me do yours,” said Langa quickly, before Reki could do it himself, and Reki bounced on the balls of his feet, nodding, and pressed the bracelet into Langa’s sweaty palm. He spread his hand out between them, and Langa’s hands bumped up against his fingers, the knuckles that he loved to kiss when Reki was feeling self-conscious, and Reki laughed a little, as Langa tightened the bracelet around him.

“We look good!” Reki said, and Langa felt himself smiling again, the nerves melting away as he rocked on his feet, a little, nodding.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and Reki poked his tongue between his teeth, satisfied, tangling their fingers together, and for a moment they both just looked down, happily, at the way the braided colors blended together, a perfect mix of red and blue. Reki had changed their fingernail polish this week, painting their nails a soft gold color that caught the sunlight just right. A lot of things had been changing lately, Langa thought, like the glasses and bringing Yua to S and Reki’s different eyeliner styles, but when Reki squeezed his hand, Langa felt secure, warm to his toes, and a little bit excited.

He knew the important things had stayed the same.

The wind whipped Langa’s hair back as they swung around another street corner, the moped skidding on the loose gravel of the road. Ahead, the water sparkled in the sunlight, the canopy of trees above making the road look speckled and bright, and Langa focused on his handlebars, the rumbling grip beneath his palms, and the tight clasp of Reki’s arms around his waist.

The air was hot and dry in his mouth as the moped bounced over cobblestones, into a tiny local town that he had never seen before, plants hanging over sidewalks, shop owners waving to each other across the street. “Where are we?” Reki asked, leaning close to his ear, but Langa just shrugged, hanging on tight to the handlebars, because he had no idea where they were.

They had ridden for nearly a half an hour, no destination in sight, no plan in mind. Langa had been relying on finding somewhere that *felt* right, and at the next street corner he slowed, glancing ahead at the fence by the water. They were beside a convenience store, so he turned off the moped, unclipping his helmet.

“We’re buying snacks,” he told Reki, and Reki snickered, squeezing his waist affectionately, scrambling off the bike.

“Of course we are,” he said. “Is this part of the date? Are you gonna buy me stuff?”

His grin was so pretty in the sunshine, his hair blown all wild by the moped, and Langa felt a little warm and a little sweaty, because of course he had been planning to buy Reki things. This was his date, wasn't it? And he wanted Reki to feel loved and cared for the way Langa always did, so he nodded. "Yes," he said, and then added, "And I won't even spill ice cream down your shirt."

Reki made a face, kicking at Langa's ankles as Langa climbed off the bike, putting down the kickstand, and Langa laughed a little, feeling even warmer. "Dude, shut it," Reki grumbled, but he slid his hand into Langa's as they went inside the convenience store, squeezing their sweaty palms together.

They went up and down the aisles and then back again, looking at everything. Langa tried to read aloud the labels that Reki pointed to, and Reki laughed every time Langa fumbled over a word, nudging their shoulders together, and so maybe Langa started fumbling on purpose, just to hear the way Reki snickered into his hand. The convenience store was small, but there were so many things to see, and Langa got lost in the bright colors of the candy aisle, in the feeling of Reki's thumb rubbing contentedly over his knuckles.

He said as much, or at least he tried to, tripping over the explanation, and the smile Reki gave him was so soft that Langa's heart squeezed. "You're the only one who could get lost in a convenience store, dude," Reki said, and then laughed, nudging impossibly close to his side, so pretty and vibrant in his tie-dye. "Well, you and me, when I'm with you."

Langa squeezed his hand, pressing his toes into his sandals. He knew that Reki liked to slow down with him sometimes, and it was one of his favorite things, the way Reki appreciated all the surprising things Langa's brain got stuck on. For some reason the moment made him feel brave, so he kissed Reki's stubbly cheek, even though they were probably in plain view of the cashier.

Reki laughed, his neck sort of red, and then he leaned over and kissed Langa's cheek, too. "You know what you wanna eat, baby?" he asked, swinging their hands between them, and Langa's heart squeezed at the casual way he said the pet name, as if it came naturally to him . He nodded.

"I want burgers."

“Of course you do,” said Reki, laughing again, and Langa pressed his foot to the edge of Reki’s sandal.

“You want a slushie,” he said, and Reki grinned.

“You bet I do,” he said. “Man, look at you. The best boyfriend in the world. *My* boyfriend. Ah, man, I’m so freakin’ lucky.”

Langa could feel his face going pink, so hurriedly he tugged on Reki’s hand, pulling him down the aisle again, and together they gathered tinfoil-wrapped burgers and gummy candy and neon-colored slushies. At the register, Reki insisted on paying for Langa’s food, which made Langa’s hands feel hot and sweaty as he counted out his own change, Reki’s fingers tucked carefully into the pocket of Langa’s shorts, a tiny, secure anchor.

Outside the sun was brighter than ever, and Langa squinted, rubbing at his eyes underneath his glasses. “Those things bothering you?” asked Reki, stuffing his money into his own pockets, looking up at Langa. “I can drive for a while if you wanna take them off.”

“You’re not supposed to,” said Langa, but he only wavered for a moment before saying, “Okay.” They were far from home, in a peaceful seaside town; nobody would ever know. Carefully he climbed onto the moped behind Reki, tucking his glasses into the collar of his t-shirt and wrapping his arms around Reki’s waist, his palms thrilling with the touch of Reki’s warm, bare skin. Reki snuggled back against him, a little, experimenting with the controls of the moped until, with a jolt, they were rocketing down the road again.

The driving was clumsy; Reki kept veering too close to the curb and jerking the moped away again, but Langa squeezed his thighs against Reki’s hips and felt good, good and warm. If it weren’t for his stomach growling, he would have been happy just riding on the moped with Reki forever, no matter where they went. Everywhere was home with Reki, he thought, and then felt a little flustered with himself, because he was being so cheesy.

But maybe he would whisper that thought to Reki later, in between kisses, to see Reki get flustered too, and oh, the image made Langa’s toes curl pleasantly in his sandals.

The moped rumbled under the canopy of trees again, on a cobble road alongside the water, and ahead of them Langa caught sight of a warm sunspot, tucked away beside the path. “Here,” he said, barely thinking about the word, and Reki made a surprised sound in his throat and swerved the moped again, nearly hitting a tree, and the moped tipped. With a shout both of them went tumbling off, rolling onto the grass, and the moped crashed on its side on the street.

“Shit!” Reki bounced up, groping around wildly for Langa, who just groaned a little. When he opened his eyes, he could see the blue sky through the leaves, and Reki’s fingers fumbled to pull his glasses out of the collar of his shirt. “Are they—ah,” and his shoulders drooped in relief. “They’re not broken! We’re all good.”

“What about me,” grumbled Langa, wincing, touching his side. “I think my *back* is broken.”

Reki laughed, leaning over him, the tips of his hair catching the sunlight, his dimples deep in his cheeks. Langa made a face up at him, his heart thumping, because Reki was so beautiful, even with dirt smeared over one of his temples, grass in his hair. “Aw, you’re fine,” Reki said, and he touched Langa’s face with the hand holding his glasses, and Langa tipped his head up.

He knew he was blushing when he mumbled, “Kiss it better?” but the sound Reki made was worth it. Then Reki was blushing, too, mumbling something that sounded like, *you baby,* as he leaned down, his shoulders hunching over both of them as he pressed his mouth to the corner of Langa’s lips. Langa tried to lean up, to kiss more deeply, but Reki moved away again, so that Langa had to chase him. Langa huffed, feeling his face growing warmer, the familiar itch in his sweaty palms as they clutched at the grass stems. “Please,” he huffed out, and he watched Reki’s eyes crinkle up, one of his hands smoothing Langa’s hair out of his eyes.

“Please, huh?” And then he was leaning over Langa again, his breath ghosting over Langa’s mouth as he mumbled, “Can’t argue with that,” and then they were kissing again, in the secluded area beside the water, the moped laying forgotten beside them, the flustered itch melting away into something sweet and comfortable.

My love, Langa thought, happily, tilting his face up against Reki’s warm mouth, one of his hands reaching for Reki’s knee, settling on the band-aid there. Reki shifted closer, humming against Langa’s lips, and Langa breathed into the kiss, smiling, because they could kiss

forever, couldn't they? The day was warm, and they were all alone by the water, the sound of birds overhead, the feeling of grass tickling his bare legs, his arms. Langa could feel so many things, so many wonderful beautiful things, and the most beautiful thing of all was the way Reki began to smile into the kiss, too, laughing a little and pulling away to poke Langa's cheek.

"Love you," Reki said, affectionate, and Langa turned his head to press his face against Reki's sunwarm leg, feeling the hair there soft and prickly, and mumbled,

"My love."

And Reki's thrumming body paused. Then his hand was smoothing Langa's hair out of his face, his voice low and scratchy when he whispered, "What'd you say?"

Langa was warm, all over. His hands were warm and his chest was warm and his face was warm, but it was a pleasant warmth, and he felt brave, even though he was blushing. Reki had made blushing a good thing, a safe thing, so Langa mumbled again, "I said, my love."

Reki made a sound, clearing his throat. "Say...say it again?"

Langa hummed. "Reki, my love."

Reki shifted, clearing his throat again. His voice sounded deeply embarrassed when he mumbled, "I was hoping you'd start saying that."

Finally Langa cracked his eyes open, squinting up at him lovingly. Reki's hair framed his face, overgrown and frizzy, and his eyes were scrunched up at the corners, his hand tangling itself in Langa's ponytail. "I like saying it," Langa whispered back, and he found Reki's hand among the grass and squeezed his fingers, although not too tightly, because Reki had sprained his hand a couple of days ago and Langa was still remembering to be gentle with him, because he was precious. "And it's true. You *are* my love."

Reki made another aborted sound, rubbing his mouth with the hand holding Langa's. Langa's knuckles brushed against the burnt skin of Reki's cheeks, textured and hot and wonderful. "You're mine," muttered Reki, and Langa felt himself smiling, his cheek squished against Reki's knee, so warm and full of love, his love for Reki and Reki's love for him. He adored Reki, the way he adored the sun, and he knew Reki adored him too, and so they glowed together, lying there and gazing happily into each other's eyes.

Finally Reki brushed the sweaty baby hairs off Langa's forehead and bent to kiss him there, his lips chapped and gentle between Langa's eyebrows. "Wanna eat?" he asked, touching Langa's stomach lightly, and Langa huffed a laugh, because he *was* hungry, and Reki had known, like always.

"Yes," he said, struggling to sit up, and Reki straightened Langa's shirt, covering up the sliver of sweaty skin and patting Langa's hip, and Langa felt warm, leaning over and dropping a kiss on Reki's shoulder. How had he ever dreamed of any date besides this one? The sun was dappled across the expanse of Reki's pretty skin, the water glistening beside them, and somewhere a bird called to its friend and the friend called back, two twin chips in the trees above them, and Reki laughed again, for no reason other than the simple joy of being alive.

They unpacked the food and the picnic blanket, and Reki brought out his trusty skateboard, which he had insisted on bringing even though he didn't know what kind of date it was. Reki wolfed down his food and then scrambled up again, throwing the board down, doing little flips and tricks on the cobblestones while Langa continued to eat, more slowly, savoring every moment.

He hoped he would have a lifetime of moments with Reki, more photobooth strips to tack to his walls, more sloppily-decorated matching t-shirts to hang in his closet, more inside jokes to whisper to each other at convenience store cash registers. He knew he would cherish each and every one of them.

"Langa, watch!" Reki called, even though Langa was already watching, and Langa gave him a thumbs-up as Reki bounced off the fence by the water, twisting in the air and landing hard on his board again. Reki waved wildly back, with his whole arm, and then, because he could, Langa blew him a kiss and watched Reki splutter, red-faced. "Not fair!" he yelled.

"It is fair," said Langa, taking another bite of his burger as Reki huffed, throwing his weight back onto the board. Reki's phone lit up on the picnic blanket, and Langa angled his face to

read it, shoving his glasses back on so he could see: *Make sure Langa gets those little kisses he likes in the backroom when we're clocking into work!* read Reki's reminders, and, *Don't forget to swap out the hoodie you gave Langa for a fresh one! Remember to buy pocky for Langa 'cause he's never tried it and he doesn't know I'm gonna use it to kiss him mwahahaha*

Langa smiled to himself, curling his warm, warm toes in his sandals. Even now, Reki was still coming up with all these dumb little excuses to kiss him.

Reki came hurrying back to the blanket not long later, sweating and puffing air, blathering on about "water, I need water" until Langa found the bottles of water in their convenience store bags. He hid his own phone under his thigh, so Reki wouldn't see the reminders that Langa had begun to leave for himself, things like *assure Reki that he's perfect* and *check if Reki's conditioner bottle is empty,* and even one that read, *call Reki baby,* although Langa had never needed to be reminded about that one.

"You looked good out there," Langa said, just to see Reki's ears go red, and Reki gulped down the water even faster, crushing the water bottle in his fist.

"C'mere," he said, tossing it aside, and he put his sweaty hand on Langa's face and leaned in, kissing him. Langa could feel the heat radiating from his face, and when Reki pulled away, his chest was still heaving, sweat glistening on his upper lip as he rubbed it. "Ah, that hits the spot."

Langa's chest was hot. "What?"

Reki kicked him across the picnic blanket, leaning back on his wrists. "Told you. I was thirsty."

Langa's chest burned again, and he kicked Reki back, rubbing his hands on his shorts. "Stop," he said, and Reki laughed, tipping his head back so the sun shone on his face and his neck, the collar of his shirt sticking to the tan line around his throat. He looked so good that Langa's whole body felt sweaty and stifled, but then Reki nudged their hands together, and Langa only had to swallow once before he managed to tangle their fingers together.

They sat there for a moment, soaking in the sun, before Reki puffed out a breath, reaching for another water bottle. “How’d you find this place, anyway?” he asked, glancing over at Langa, one eye squinted against the light. “It’s, like, perfect.”

Langa’s heart squeezed. “I, um.”

Reki paused, watching him, waiting, the corners of his mouth lingering on an almost-smile, like he knew he would like the answer, no matter what it was. So Langa pressed his toes into the blanket, letting their shoulders touch, and admitted,

“I didn’t find it until today. I was sort of...improvising.”

Reki stared at him for a moment, and then the smile spread over his face, and he punched Langa’s shoulder. “Dude. You came up with this on the spot?”

Lange didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, so he just shrugged, and Reki laughed again, leaning closer to him, their shoulders solid and warm pressed together. Langa glanced down at his lap, tugging at a string of his shorts. “I wanted it to be romantic, but I’m not very good at...I mean, I mean it’s not as nice as the date you planned. With the carnival, and everything.”

“You mean the *practice* date?” Reki nudged his elbow against Langa’s arm, and Langa kicked his ankle, leaving his foot pressed there against the skin.

“It was still romantic,” he said. “Even though it was...practice.”

“I wanted it to be real,” Reki said, as if he was reminiscing, gazing off at the sun shimmering on the water, and Langa felt very warm inside, even though Reki had told him this many, many times before. “Anyway, remember what I told you on the Ferris Wheel? Any date with you is good, ‘cause you’re the thing that makes them good in the first place.”

Langa swallowed. He remembered how big his heart had swelled, high above the world in that tiny Ferris Wheel cart. He had wanted everything to be real so badly, and so had Reki, and now it was, with their legs sprawled across this pretty picnic blanket in the heat of the summer. “You’re so sappy,” Langa managed, and Reki laughed, pressing even closer to him, his head falling against Langa’s shoulder.

“You like it,” he said, glancing up, his eyes grinning, and Langa’s heart thumped once at the way his irises caught the sun.

“Yeah,” he said, because he did like it. The mushy words always made his cheeks flush and his heart glow, and he thought about them at night, whenever he felt nervous or lonely. Sometimes he was still afraid of misunderstanding things, but he had gotten better at checking, sending Reki texts like, *does “it’s a date” mean I am supposed to wear date clothes?* and *can I kiss you in the doorway when I come over?* The questions flustered Reki sometimes, but he was good about answering, and he was good at explaining things, and Langa was good at nodding along, collecting those words and filing them away into the appropriate places in his brain. His broken, healing brain.

“My date wasn’t perfect anyway,” Reki mumbled, against his sleeve, kissing him clumsily on the shoulder. “I tried to put the *Do Not Disturb* sign on the door, but the night didn’t work out exactly the way I had planned.”

Langa’s heartbeat fluttered. “I saw that you did that.”

Reki breathed a laugh. “Really? I thought I was being so sneaky.”

“You’re never as sneaky as you think you are.”

Reki laughed again, kissing his shoulder. “That guy made me so mad,” he said, squeezing Langa’s fingers, and Langa knew he meant Miguel, although Miguel’s face was a blur in his mind. “If we ever run into him again, you know what I’m gonna do? I’m gonna jump in front of you and shout at him that you’re per—”

“Stop,” Langa interrupted hastily, but he could hear Reki’s grin as he finished,

“That you’re perfect,” and then he kissed Langa’s jaw, and the skin under his ear, sticky with sweat, and Langa flushed. Reki always teased him about the things he had shouted at those girls at school, but Langa knew it was only because the bullying still hurt him, wounds burrowed deep down under his skin that he often refused to let Langa see. But he always let Langa climb on top of him and shower him with gentle kisses and even gentler praises, whispering into the quiet of his bedroom, and slowly, slowly Reki’s heart always cracked open. He was messy and raw and stubborn when he cried, biting on his knuckles to stifle the sound, but he always allowed Langa to kiss the tears away, his hands soothing on Reki’s shoulders until Reki slumped against his chest, crying himself exhausted.

They both had bad days, still. Langa sometimes woke up with trembly hands, unable to get warm even under the hottest showers, and he would call Reki and mumble into the phone, “You’re not leaving me today, right?” and Reki would always hurry over, bringing snacks and an armful of sweatshirts. And some days Reki paced around his house in frustration, the frayed wires of his brain fizzing, unable to be touched or comforted, and Langa had learned to let him vent his agitation into his work, in the banging and drilling in his garage. Reki always texted him afterward, when he was ready for cuddles, and sometimes Langa was already in his room, his cheek pressed to the warm windowsill as he read through Reki’s skating magazines, or out on the street practicing tricks.

They had bad days, but today was a good day, the sky clear and bright, and Reki rubbed Langa’s fingers on the blanket, each one of them carefully, tracing the scars on his palms. “Are we going to S tonight?” Langa mumbled, after a while, and Reki hummed an affirmative.

“I asked Yua if she wanted to ride over with us,” he said, making a face, “but she’s going with her *girlfriend.* ”

Langa laughed a little, at the way Reki wrinkled his nose. “Haven’t they only been on one date?” he asked.

“Still,” said Reki, huffing. “She’s abandoning us.”

“I think Margot is nice,” said Langa. Yua’s “girlfriend” was a German transfer student at the local all-girls school, and her presence at S made Langa feel less alone, somehow, in the sea

of people who had grown up in Okinawa. The more they hung out with people, the more Langa realized how nice it was to have friends, a whole circle of friends. “Can’t we just do things all together?”

Reki huffed again, tugging on Langa’s palm, dragging their hands up into his lap. “Did I hear that right? From Langa *I don’t like people* Hasegawa? I should’ve known you’d rather hang out with girls than me.”

“Stop,” said Langa, turning his head to nuzzle against the side of Reki's head, pressing a kiss to his temple, his mouth curving into a smile at the way Reki shifted closer to him, their feet bumping together on the warm blanket. “You know you’re my favorite.”

“Mm,” mumbled Reki, tipping his head up. “Nah, I didn’t know. Remind me?”

Langa tried to stifle the smile, his heart squirming happily in his chest, at the openness of Reki’s face, his eyes closed, his eyelashes sticking out at funny angles, a trusting softness around his mouth. Langa fumbled to fit their faces together, his hands warm on Reki’s face as he kissed him. He pulled away a little to whisper, “My love,” and Reki let out a breath, his mouth parting, and Langa hummed a little, rubbing his thumb along Reki’s bottom lip.

“Kiss,” Reki mumbled, without opening his eyes, and Langa felt the laugh bubble up in his chest as he leaned in again, pressing their mouths together again. Reki tasted like sweat and cherry slushie, and his hand found the side of Langa’s face, tender and warm as he cupped his jaw, and Langa breathed out, something thrilling in his chest as Reki licked at the edges of his mouth. The more often they kissed, the more Reki remembered the things Langa liked: his fingers against the sensitive skin of Langa’s jaw, cradling his face, his tongue tracing the roof of Langa’s mouth, hot and clumsy, his voice raspy when he pulled away to whisper, “Love you, baby,” just to hear Langa’s broken whimper.

Maybe somewhere Reki had another list of reminders, one kept hidden from the world. The thought made Langa pant into his mouth.

He shifted closer to Reki on the blanket, grabbing onto the sleeves of his t-shirt, and Reki welcomed him, one of his hands sliding up into Langa’s hair to tilt his head. Langa’s glasses bumped against Reki’s nose, and Reki laughed against him, kissing the corner of Langa’s lips before fumbling to pull the glasses off, tossing them onto a safe part of the blanket. “So

pretty, Langa," he whispered, pecking his mouth before pulling away again, and Langa swallowed a whine, because he wanted to *kiss,* he wanted to kiss until they were lying flat on the blanket, breathless and drowning in each other.

"You're pretty," he managed, and Reki hummed in his throat, sounding embarrassed, and he pecked at Langa's mouth again, barely touching his tongue to Langa's lips before pulling away, and Langa panted, clutching at his sleeves. He could feel Reki's breathing against him, their skin tingling in every place they touched, and he wanted Reki to kiss him again, he wanted Reki to kiss him and kiss him and kiss him. His breath stuttered when Reki puffed air against his lips, tugging his hair, and desperately he tried to find words in his scattered mind to ask for more.

"You're sure you don't get tired of this?" Reki mumbled, nudging their noses together, and Langa's chest thumped as he tried to catch his breath, but he couldn't, he couldn't because he could still feel the movement of Reki's lips, so warm breathing against him, so close to touching him, so close. Reki's mouth ghosted over his own, barely brushing his lips as he mumbled, "You don't get tired of how much I like kissing you?"

Langa nearly groaned, squeezing his upper arms. " *Reki.* "

"Yeah?"

Langa sucked in a breath, his face going hot at the way that Reki shifted closer to him, their legs pressing together, and then he breathed out, "Are you crazy?"

Reki laughed, leaning in closer to press their mouths together, and Langa's heart thumped in relief, pounding in his flushed cheeks . "Mm," Reki mumbled against him, using his tongue to open Langa's mouth, leaving Langa panting again, "Maybe a little crazy. When it comes to you."

Langa could only whimper, melting against him as Reki kissed him so good, so sweet, his tongue hot against Langa's teeth, their noses bumping together. Reki's hands were in his hair again, messing it up, unraveling the hair tie Langa had used this morning until his hair fell around his shoulders, and Langa squeezed at his arms, trying to kiss back as best as he could. He sucked on Reki's bottom lip until Reki was making noise in his throat, so much noise that Langa flushed hot even in their secluded place under the trees.

They fell apart, gasping for air, and then found each other again, toppling sideways onto the blanket until they were lying on the lumpy ground, surrounded by empty food containers and grass clippings and Reki's skateboard. Reki's mouth was even sweeter this way, Langa thought in his hazy, blurry brain, out in the warm summer air with bugs buzzing around the flowers, where they belonged. He was whispering something against Langa's lips as he kissed him, and Langa tried to focus, enough to catch glimpses of, "the coolest," and "so pretty for me," and "m'so lucky" and so many other praises that made Langa's head swim. He cupped Reki's face with his hands, both of them on Reki's flushed cheeks, whispering back,

"Baby, baby,"

until Reki whined into his mouth, shifting even closer, tangling one of his hands in Langa's t-shirt and tugging. "I like that," he mumbled, and Langa's body thrilled all over, wiggling a little because he couldn't help himself, he loved Reki so much.

"My baby," he whispered, and then, "My love," and Reki's breathing was coming so quickly that Langa laughed, his chest squirming with joy, kissing Reki's beautiful red cheeks and his forehead and his dimples and even his eyelids, the pale skin of his eyelids where he had always wanted to kiss. "You're so perfect," he said, "Reki, my Reki, you know that I love everything about you, right?" Reki choked on a noise, and he tried to kiss Langa's mouth again, his face hot, and Langa kissed back, but only for a minute, because his heart was brimming with words, so many words he wanted to share, so many things he loved about Reki. "Your smile," he whispered, the moment Reki pulled away again, to catch his breath, "I love your smile, and those tan lines on your feet from your flip-flops, and the way you bring your board everywhere, and the way you roll your sleeves up even when they're short sleeves, and I love when you kiss me, did you know that? I love it more than anything, and," and Reki made another noise, covering his mouth, and Langa was laughing, then, cuddling closer to him, pressing their foreheads together.

"You," Reki managed, and Langa kissed the knuckles he had pressed to his mouth, laughing again, because *oh* he felt so warm inside, warm and full and loved.

"You don't have to be embarrassed," he whispered. "It's just the truth."

“I’m not embarrassed,” Reki muttered, pulling his hand away from his mouth, kissing Langa again, and they kissed until they were breathless, falling apart and staring at each other with heaving chests. Langa watched the blotchy blush on Reki’s face as he breathed in and out, his hair in disarray, tangled around his headband. Carefully Langa rubbed his thumb over Reki’s nose and eyebrows, until Reki made a face, sticking out his tongue and licking Langa’s hand.

Langa jerked away, the laugh bubbling up in his chest again. “Gross.”

“You like it when my tongue’s in your mouth,” Reki muttered, and Langa flushed, laughing, kissing his nose. Reki kissed his nose, too, and then his chin, and then they both rolled onto their back, breathing up at the sky, still touching in so many places that Langa could feel Reki’s thrumming heartbeat, in sync with his own.

He could have laid there forever, breathing in the vibrance of the summer day, the sky bright between the fluttering trees, the sweat rolling down their legs, damp against the picnic blanket, clinging to each other’s hands. But then Reki cleared his throat and rubbed at his mouth, turning his head on the blanket to Langa, and asked, “You wanna sit in my lap?”

Langa felt his neck go warm. This was something Reki had been asking more and more lately, mostly when he knew Langa was feeling troubled over something, but sometimes just because it felt nice, the safety of sitting snug against each other. “Okay,” he said, and clumsily they untangled their legs and sat up, shifting around on the blanket, pushing Reki’s board out of the way. Langa settled between Reki’s thighs, his back pressed to Reki’s chest, and breathed out long and slow as Reki wrapped his arms around his waist, holding him tight.

“Good?” Reki mumbled, hooking his chin over Langa’s shoulder, and Langa nodded, sighing again, relaxing into him. He could see Reki’s feet stretched out on the blanket alongside his legs, his toes flexing around the funny sandal tan lines that Langa loved so much, the sweaty hair thick around his ankles. Reki gave a happy sort of sigh, too, kissing his neck lazily. “Feels good for me, too.”

“I’m glad,” Langa murmured, nuzzling closer, and he knew they were being silly and mushy but he didn’t care, because his body was glowing, a quiet, steady glow that he only felt around Reki, whether they were tangled up together like this, or collapsed on top of the half-pipe with bruised elbows, or racing down the street with lungs burning too much to laugh. He

tilted his head and kissed the skin under Reki's eye, the first place he could reach, and Reki hummed, satisfied.

"Do you wanna get ramen on the way home?" he asked, squeezing his thighs around Langa. "It's my ideal date, y'know. We go skating somewhere pretty, 'n I kiss you, and then we get ramen and eat until we're exhausted."

Langa felt all fuzzy inside, his hands curling around Reki's. "Really?"

"Uh-huh." Reki pressed his mouth to Langa's cheek, barely even a kiss, more of a hum. "I told you about it the first time we kissed. But you never took the hint."

Langa was surprised into laughing, tilting his eyes to look at Reki. "The first time?" he asked, and Reki nodded, his face a little red, his hands twitching around Langa's waist before relaxing again, and Langa could feel himself smile until his cheeks hurt. "The first time," he repeated, more softly, because oh, he had loved Reki since that very first day, and maybe a similar flame had been kindling in Reki's chest, too, and gently Langa kissed him, on his beautiful, sweet mouth, and Reki kissed him back, their bodies pressed close.

Langa was happy. They loved each other, and today Langa loved the world, too, the way Reki always did, with his big heart and his excitable energy and his passionate rambling, his love for exploring new places, for skateboarding down every side street, petting every single dog they saw, painting ordinary things in bright, vibrant colors that brought the earth to life before Langa's eyes. A part of Langa had always been reluctant toward the world, shying away from the blurring sounds and the loud voices, and maybe a part of him always would be, but today the world was peaceful and warm and lovable, and Langa would cherish the feeling in his heart forever and ever.

"I've been thinking about something lately," Reki mumbled against him, and Langa relaxed deeper into him, humming a *yeah?* Reki tightened his hands around Langa's waist again, smoothing down the shirt, before saying softly, "I was thinking, like, maybe after we graduate we could get our own place together? I know...I know it's early, I mean, you don't have to agree right away, but I was just thinking it'd be nice, to wake up to you every day n' stuff." He cracked his eyes open, glancing up at Langa. "What d'you think?"

Langa swallowed, but he couldn't swallow down the smile growing on his face, his chest beginning to swell with the thought of living together with Reki, washing their clothes together in a big jumble, so they smelled like each other all the time. They could share a bathroom cluttered with Reki's eyeliner and Langa's acne medicine, and a fridge stuffed full of food they would both be awful at cooking, and together they could curl up on the couch each night under soft blankets, tangling their feet together and watching silly shopping-cart YouTube videos. "I want to," he said, and Reki's face scrunched up, his cheeks very warm against Langa's skin.

"Wanna live with you forever and ever," he mumbled, and then puffed out a breath, half a laugh. "Hah. Sorry. Is that too much?"

Langa's heart was very full. "No," he whispered back. "I'm the same." Reki made a soft noise, and Langa tilted his face so they could kiss again, feeling the life thrumming through Reki's warm body, his constantly-vibrating body, the heartbeat that Langa wanted to fall asleep to for the rest of his life. Reki could never be too much for him, he thought, because Langa loved every part of him, his endless rambling conversations, his bold kisses, his overwhelming blush in the darkness. Langa kissed him until he couldn't kiss him any longer, and then, when they fell apart, he whispered against Reki's lips, "We're the same."

fin.

Chapter End Notes

Hello hello!!!

Wow, wow. It's hard to believe we finally reached the end (a couple hundred thousand words later, haha). I have some things to share with you all, if you would like to stay; otherwise, please know I appreciate every moment you spent with this story! it truly means the world.

first: I am writing another renga fic, and I would love it if you wanted to keep up with me/my writing there! you can also come visit me on my instagram and my tumblr, as always.

second: I began writing this fic casually as a break between the third and fourth drafts of my ~novel~ (what a big, scary word, hahaha) and I never imagined that it would receive the amount of love that it did. tfthkab was honestly a life-changing experience for me in so many ways, especially since before this I mostly wrote in isolation; I learned so much about my own writing, working under pressure, and the kinds of romance I want to see

in books out in the world. Thank you for all of the wonderful comments, the incredible artwork, and especially for all the sweet, sweet people who reached out to tell me how much they saw themselves in Langa and his panic. I hope someday I can give readers anxiety representation in a more professional form, but until then, please know that your words continue to inspire me!! For the first time in my life, you all have made me believe my writing dreams could be possible, and so this fic will always have an incredibly special place in my heart, as will all of you.

with all my love,
buzz :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!